

## INSECURE FOOD: DIET, EATING, AND IDENTITY AMONG THE ETHIOPIAN SURI PEOPLE IN THE DEVELOPMENTAL AGE

Jon ABBINK

*African Studies Centre, University of Leiden*

**ABSTRACT** In this paper I discuss food, cultural identity and development among the agro-pastoral Suri people of Southwest Ethiopia. Their food system is discussed in its actual form and in its process of change, accelerated since a decade or so. The theoretical concern of this paper is with issues of identity formation and continuity through the materiality of food and food systems, in the context of varying assumptions underlying discourses of development. The Suri people remain at the margins of the modernizing Ethiopian state and experienced a decline in food security, health and wealth in the last decade, coinciding with growing inter-group tension and new state developmental plans which devalue the agro-pastoral mode of life. State support or investment is in massive sugar and other mono-crop plantations and in enterprises by foreigners and private capitalists, not matched by parallel investment in local economies of agro-pastoralism and crop cultivation. Some of the effects on the production system, diet and ‘food sovereignty’ of the Suri are described so as to highlight the challenges they face, including growing internal differentiation, pressure on modifying their food system and the increasing sale and use of alcoholic drinks. Observing the, often ambivalent, changes in the Suri food pattern and food consumption shows the challenges they face in (re)defining group identity, responding to internal tensions and to state-capitalist modernizing schemes that impact their way of life.

**Key Words:** Food culture; Agro-pastoralism; Group identity; Suri people; Southwest Ethiopia; Social change; Develop mentalism.

### INTRODUCTION

This is a study in food, diet change and cultural identity among an agro-pastoral population in Ethiopia facing the challenges of ‘development’. Theoretically, this paper addresses the issue of minority identity formation and continuity through the materiality of food and food systems, as well as that of discourses of development across different social and political groups. It will be shown that even quotidian social repertoires like food production and consumption are closely linked to wider issues of political economy, and that under certain conditions people’s ‘food sovereignty’, defined as “... the right [...] to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods” (Schiavoni, 2016: 1), may be slipping away.

I specifically examine the food system of the Suri, in the Southwestern Maji area, a people famous in global tourist discourse but at the margins of the modernizing Ethiopian state, and show how they are experiencing a decline in food security, health and wealth in the last decade. This appears to coincide with new

developmental initiatives undertaken in their area, including sedentarization. Some effects of such a process are found also among other agro-pastoralist populations (see for example Fratkin et al., 2004), but among the Suri this is augmented due to a state policy of change that appears to gradually try and make the agro-pastoral mode of life impossible. In southern Ethiopia, there has been little if any state support or investment in agro-pastoral production. This conforms to a general trend in Africa, despite growing scientific insights that (agro-) pastoralism is a good option in many semi-arid regions in both an environmental and economic sense (UNOCHA, 2007; IFAD, 2010; Behnke & Kerven, 2013; Abbink et al., 2014; CDE, 2015; COPACSO, 2015). Instead, state elites in Ethiopia prefer to directly appropriate the resources of the land and to build their power in the ‘peripheries’ (cf. Fana, 2016), relegating smaller ethno-cultural groups with ‘traditional’ modes of livelihood such as (agro-)pastoralism or hunting and gathering to oblivion, based on old ideas of modernization of which cultural denigration and expulsion seem to be a part (cf. Sassen, 2014).

The paper has three parts. Preceded by some general reflections in the first part I present an overview of the nature of the Suri’s environment, food production and diet composition, based on fieldwork over the past two decades;<sup>(1)</sup> in the second part I discuss challenges and processes of change that have been impacting on their food system, and finally I comment on the changing Suri food culture and its relation to ‘identity’ issues, i.e., their attitude *vis-à-vis* others as well as their possibilities to deal with crisis and interference.

Observing Suri food and nutritional crisis behavior shows the ways in which these agro-pastoralists have tried to respond not only to environmental problems, occasional drought and subsistence crisis in the recent past, but also their difficulty to adapt to both internal tensions and the modernizing onslaught on their way of life just mentioned. These processes have gained speed after ca. 2000 (cf. Abbink, 2009; Oakland Institute, 2013; 2014; Wagstaff, 2015; Fana, 2015). Secondary aims of this paper are to assess whether the ‘nutritional agency’ of these agro-pastoralists is affected by development initiatives, and if and how food issues play a role in the persistence of inter-group conflicts.

Such themes as the above have been rehearsed in the extant anthropological literature on nutrition and on food cultures, the two main themes in social science studies of changing food patterns (cf. Chrzan, 2013; Dirks & Hunter, 2013). How these evolve and change is a long-term process with historical dimensions. But my intention here is to focus more specifically on a critical, compressed, moment in time: the actual period of change and transition among an agro-pastoral people, produced by new state policies and inter-ethnic group crises that we see since about the mid-2000s. As a preliminary conclusion it may be noted that traditional Suri food culture and nutrition patterns in this period came under serious pressure: a) as food production and diet show signs of decline, b) the Suri face a challenge to change their food composition and consumption, and hereby subjectively experience a threat to their group identity, and c) a pattern of change from ‘nutritional success’ (cf. Grivetti, 1978) to ‘nutritional failure’ thus seems to emerge.

## STUDYING THE SURI FOOD SYSTEM AS A PRISM OF IDENTITY AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE

Food and its production and consumption are of course major global issues in view of the durable famine-prone conditions in some areas, and the topic invites quantitative studies of production methods, diet composition, daily food intake, health aspects, and of food policies by government and companies. But because of food's 'elementary' nature and central necessity in any society, the study of food cultures—the locally anchored ways of production, marketing, consumption and meaningful 'use' of food, with cultural referents and meanings—is a good way to register social change, group identity and community connections (cf. Mintz & Dubois, 2002).<sup>(2)</sup> As Fox (2002: 1) said: food is basic, and also "a focus of symbolic activity about sociality and our place in our society." As such, the study of food and diet has been at the core of anthropology almost since its emergence as a discipline (see the works of Boas, Mauss, Malinowski, and of course Audrey Richards' unsurpassed 1939 study). More than merely nutritional, food is also a means of prestige ranking, enjoyment, community formation and status distinction, as well as of 'memories' and 'subjectivities' around food and consumption patterns. I will, however, not elaborate on the latter.

While uncertainty and ambivalence regarding food and diet in the future is clearly present among the Suri, they are fairly unified in their skepticism or rejection of the 'modern' package of food and development that comes to them via processes of state planning and hegemonism. No doubt over time attitudes may change and younger generations will (have to) adapt, but that does not mean they want or like it. Their food and the perceived rejection of Suri dietary customs and preferences they see among state officials and highlanders—indeed often being the butt of scorn and denigration—touch them at the core of what they are and want to be: independent livestock herders and free people, 'not subservient cultivators in the mud of the highlands' (as one Suri youngster described it to me). So the focus here is on diet, food choice and consumption among the Suri in their quality of a culturally preferred template, which they see not in need of giving up. There is a subtext of 'resistance' noticeable in Suri food culture *vis-à-vis* outsiders. Food is therefore also a 'disquieting' subject: an issue of contestation, not only because of the fight over who gets what, i.e., on scarcity and competition, but also over hierarchies and the symbolism of taste, over the 'prestige' of food items. In certain contexts, people like the Suri are denied the 'choice' of their own food and are urged or forced to change crops and diet, and even the production of certain basic elements of this diet.

It is known from the literature that pastoral peoples' food production and diet—while sound and adequate in basic outline and composition—are always under pressure in 'modernizing' societies where their way of life is seen as a 'thing of the past' or 'backward', and that they are expected over time to conform or assimilate to the food culture patterns of more sedentary agrarian peoples or 'national' dishes and diets. This movement could be framed either as a response

to persistent food insecurity issues or to general socio-cultural or ‘political’ pressures. A cultural model of reforming ‘backward’ eating or diet styles (often with ‘health’ arguments) by state agents thus comes on top of the well-established discourse of vulnerability and famine that has made state agencies and aid organizations give food aid to pastoralists—even when not strictly needed—and thus engendering an ambivalent message of change. Several recent studies (e.g., Lokuruka, 2006: 224; Holtzman, 2007; 2009 on the Samburu) give pointers to the cultural role and symbolism of food. Many themes in such work can be recognized among the Suri of Ethiopia. In the latter’s case, however, proposed changes in the food system have to be seen as part of the entire ‘cultural package’ of change that the Ethiopian ‘developmental state’ urges on pastoral peoples. It also comprises change in settlement pattern, house-type, livelihoods and production system, an urge to de-emphasize livestock-keeping (‘overgrazing’), and socio-cultural reforms aimed to have them give up ‘harmful customs’. In this civilisational hegemonism—that has in various forms been characteristic of the Ethiopian state towards minorities since many decades (cf. Ellison, 2012)—Suri customs and way of life as a whole are seen as materially and culturally ‘backward’, thus to be modified towards modernity.

Ethiopia currently follows a classic model on top-down state-led economic development, but under a strongly authoritarian state, where pastoralists and small-holder subsistence farmers have to give way to the development of massive commercial agriculture and get weak recognition of their citizens’ rights. The model is hegemonic also in ‘territorializing’ development across the nominally recognized ‘ethnic groups’ that were given administrative autonomy and cultural rights in an earlier phase of political restructuring in the 1990s, after the current ruling party EPRDF had taken over power in 1991. Customary rights to land do not legally get recognition and land (as state property) can be appropriated for national purposes as defined by the federal state. This is what is happening in Southwest Ethiopia (see e.g., Fana, 2016 for the Gambela region; Tsegaye, 2015; Berihun, 2016).

## THE SURI PEOPLE—GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING AND SOCIETY

The Suri agro-pastoralists (ca. 34,000 people) are made up of two relatively independent sub-groups, the Chai and the Tirmaga (or Tirma), and live in and around the Kibish River valley in Ethiopia, west of the Omo River (Fig. 1 below). Linguistically they belong to the Nilo-Saharan family (speaking a South-east Surmic language). The Suri are a quite interesting group because of their long having retained a relatively isolated position and because of their unique culture, resilience and independence. They approached the proverbial image of the staunchly independent pastoralists, assertive, self-conscious, individualist, and ready to use force, verbally as well as with arms. Fieldwork among them in the 1990s and later visits in the 2000s justify this description, and the Suri themselves cultivated the image in contacts with other groups. They were always proud of their way of life and usually looked down upon local peasants because

of their deferent attitude and agricultural ‘toiling lifestyle’. They neither had a high regard for the state administration-associated highlanders, for their ‘unreliable, profiteering and deceitful’ behavior. (An exception was made for medical personnel in the local clinics.)

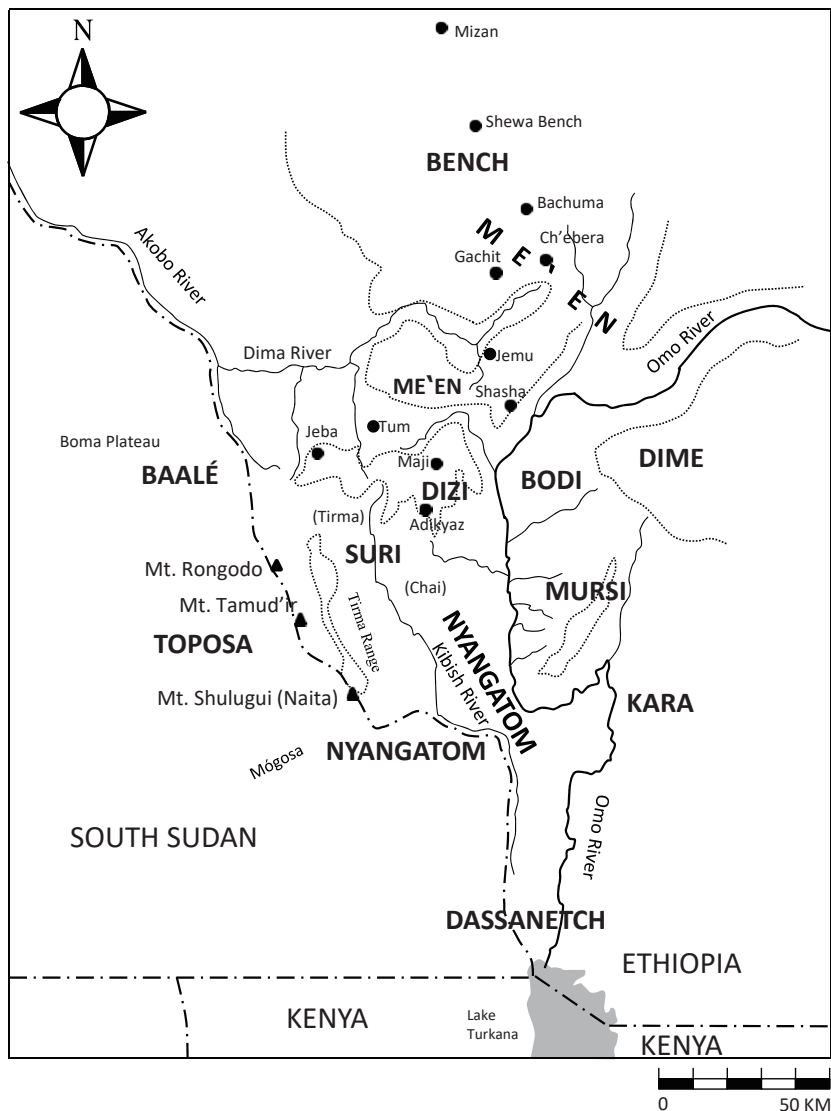


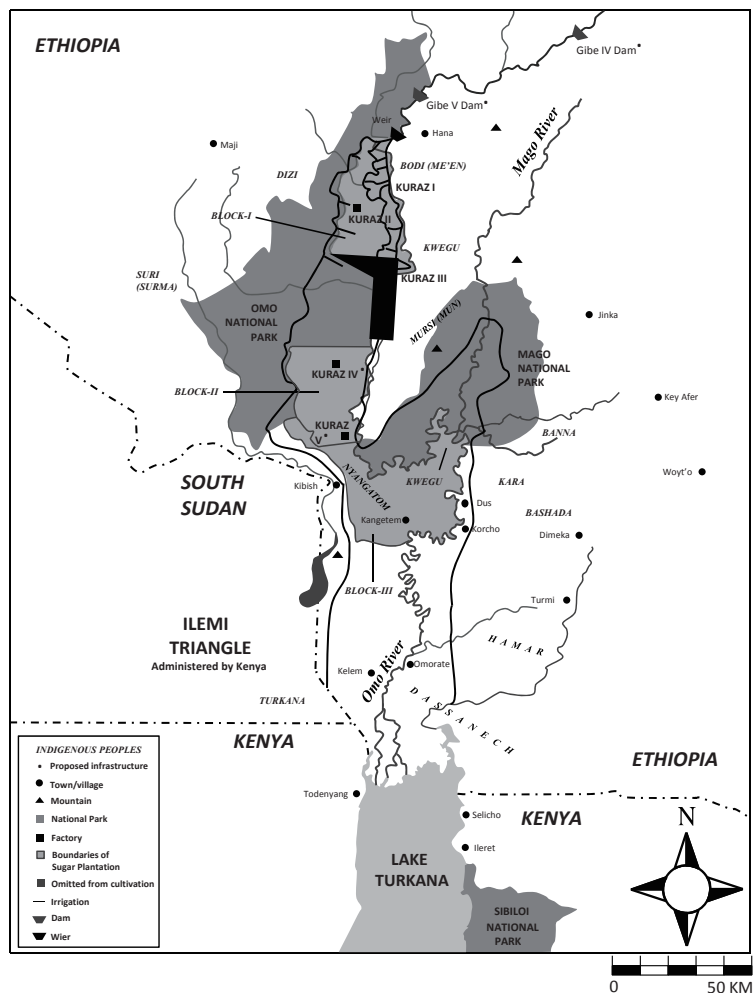
Fig. 1. Ethnic groups and landmarks in the Maji-Omo area, Southwest Ethiopia

In political terms, the Suri belong to Ethiopian state territory since 1898. However, the impact of state structures in this border area near the Sudan remained marginal in the past century; they long were more or less autonomous in a political and economic sense and one of the last groups to be integrated in the Ethiopian administrative system. This happened after 1994. The Suri now have a separate political unit in the ethno-federal Ethiopian administrative system, the ‘Surma woreda’ (= district), nominally governed by their own people. But by 2015 they were largely coopted and incorporated in an administrative regime that was almost like a caretaker structure, dominated by outsiders belonging to the ruling party and giving them little say or autonomy of action.

In previous studies I have shown how Suri society has developed and dealt with manifold challenges (Abbink, 2000; 2002b; 2009), many of them not yet met and indeed getting worse. They did not receive any substantial aid or other assistance during the major Northeast African famine crises of the 1980s (cf. Abbink, 1993) and 1990s, but largely developed their own responses, migrating and trading or selling livestock for grain. Recent state investment policies and development projects in the Omo River Valley have sidelined Suri and other local peoples (e.g., Mursi, Bodi, Kwegu, Nyangatom, Kara), who have to make way for commercial plantations and whose agro-pastoral economies (based on limited transhumance, not ‘nomadism’) or riverbank cultivation systems are in no way invested in. The developmental process is contested and often violent, and many dramatic incidents were reported.<sup>(3)</sup>

## THE ENVIRONMENT AND FOOD RESOURCES OF THE SURI

While I am mainly concerned with the dynamics of change in the food system,<sup>(4)</sup> some information must be given on the production side. Food production obviously occurs in a specific natural environment. The area of the Suri (see Fig. 1 above) is a green, undulating landscape to the south and west of the town of Maji in the Southern Region of Ethiopia and extends to the border with South Sudan. Border mountains that used to be Suri territory are Mt. Rongodò (Kutul Birino), T’amudir and Shulugui (Naita). The Suri area, rich in tree and plant species, is characterized by low hills that are outliers of the Ethiopian highlands, and by surrounding plains at ca. 900 to 1,100 m. altitude (which counts locally as ‘lowlands’), not suitable for permanent rain-fed agriculture, as they are partly semi-arid. Here the Suri pastures are located, at some distance from the foothills. In the higher areas Suri have their villages, cultivated fields and home gardens, where rainfall is just about sufficient (ca. 900 to 1,200 mm/y). Before the recent violent conflicts with their agro-pastoralist neighbours the Nyangatom and South Sudanese Toposa, the Suri pastures extended well into South Sudan, e.g., to places called Mógosa, Gará, Bagidádá, Tólimà, and south of the Boma plateau.<sup>(5)</sup> In 1987–1988, after losing battles with the well-armed Nyangatom-Toposa alliance, the Chai-Suri (the largest subgroup) moved away from Mt. Shulugui, the cultural core of their land, and settled ca. 50 km to the



**Fig. 2.** Map of the proposed ‘Kuraz’ sugar plantation development in the Ethiopian Omo Valley area (of 2010) (Source: S. Avery, 2012: 59)

north, close to the Dizi mountains. A similar movement was made by the Tir-maga, and this meant giving up access to the Sudanese pastures, which were said to have the best quality grass for the cattle.

The soils in the Suri area mostly fluvisols with some patches of lixisols in the central area (down from Kibish town to the south), ferrasols more to the east towards the Omo, and calcisols along the border with South Sudan (cf. Leenaars et al., 2014; Berhanu et al., 2013: 23). The soils in the south-eastern part of the Suri area, bordering Nyangatom settlements (who took over part of the previously Suri area around the Dirga hills) are rather poor and semi-arid,



now slated for 'Block 2' of the Ethiopian government's sugar plantations (see Fig. 2), to be irrigated with massive water flows from the Omo, the large river now dammed with the Gibe-3 dam, used for hydro-electricity generation<sup>(6)</sup>. This area of mainly low bush and grass plains was used for hunting and gathering by local people and for some shifting cultivation by newly settled Nyangatom after ca. 1995, but is now off-limits due to these development projects<sup>(7)</sup>.

Suri have a subsistence economy and were never assisted in developing their agro-pastoral economy or their market access. Next to food, all building materials, most household utensils, traditional medicine and ritual objects are from resources found in the natural environment. Their main source of cash income is alluvial gold, which they were the first to start panning in the 1930s. The Suri purchase guns, ammunition, plastic containers, coloured blankets, beads and some other decorative items from market towns.

### THE FOOD AVAILABLE AND CONSUMED

Comparatively speaking, even in the local setting of southern Ethiopia, the Suri have a fairly limited food portfolio and diet. Their general word for 'food' is *tila*. The daily pattern of meals is anchored in a light breakfast at the break of day and a major meal after dark in the evening, between 20–22 h. During the day various items are consumed in a less fixed order, e.g., during a work party, during herding in the cattle fields, or while trekking or travelling. The young males herding the cattle in the lowlands have an irregular meal pattern and more consumption of milk and blood, and gathered berries and fruits, augmented by porridge (*tila*), brought weekly by young women visiting the camps. The Suri are rather conservative in their diet; they tend to reject the cultivation and consumption of new food items, e.g., such as wheat products (bread, dumpings) or enset products (*qocch'o* or enset bread, from *Ensete ventricosum*) of their neighbours. This is not only because the environment doesn't allow it. Description of the broader context of food production and consumption of this group illustrates the way in which their food package is, in some sense, used as an idiom in inter-ethnic contacts in this area. Obviously, for the Suri as for any other people, food is not just that which is edible and eatable. Although their diet must be considered relatively simple, showing little variety and a limited range of products, food is likely also a group marker, reflecting a preferred way of life. Certain vegetables, grains, and other plant resources which they know from their farming neighbours in the highlands (the Dizi, or the Me'en people) and several of which could also be grown in their own area, are consciously refused by them. When the Suri men bring girls from the neighbouring sedentary-agrarian Dizi people as wives to their villages (patrilocal residence), these wives quickly adapt to the Suri food system—preparation and consumption—and usually give up all of their Dizi food habits.



The range of Suri food items is as follows. The three broad categories of basic products are: 1. animal products: milk, blood, meat; 2. cultivated plant products from fields and home gardens (the latter are fully under the responsibility of married women): grains, vegetables, spice plants and tobacco; and 3. products gathered from ‘the wild’: a) game meat (rare); b) fruits, berries, honey; and c) salt. They are usually processed into the specific Suri dishes (all made by women and older girls), and similar to those of many other pastoralist peoples in Eastern Africa. Another emerging category is 4. Food not produced by Suri but bought and consumed in ‘outside’ settings, in highland villages with cheap restaurants and inns. This refers to stronger alcoholic drinks and meat, mostly, and occasionally highland dishes like *injera* (the national *t’eff*-based pancake), taken with a sauce (Amh.: *wät’*) of mostly lentils and sometimes of chicken, goat or cow meat. Coffee was not known among Suri (they use the Amharic loanword *buna* for it) and is not produced in the homesteads. Some Suri started drinking it occasionally in the town bars.

The basic products of the first three categories above are indicated in the Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Suri agrarian food products

Product	Scientific name	Suri name	Comments on cultivation and use
Sorghum	<i>Sorghum bicolor</i>	<i>libá</i>	At least 13 varieties are known and/or cultivated. Ground sorghum is the basis for the staple porridge, of which there are three forms (see below). They plant it in mid-January and harvest in June.
Maize	<i>Zea mays</i>	<i>gorá</i>	Often added in the ground sorghum, especially for the local beer ( <i>gèso</i> ); harvested in late May. Other grains found among highland neighbours, like wheat (in S.: <i>gósso</i> ) or <i>t’eff</i> ( <i>Eragrostis abyssinica</i> ) are rarely cultivated and did not form part of the Suri product portfolio.
Indigenous leafy vegetables	Various species, many unidentified	Among others: <i>guguy</i> , <i>k’ey-k’ey</i> , or <i>gorbolli</i>	These green leafy vegetables are either grown in home gardens or collected from the wild.
Beans	<i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i> ; <i>Vicia faba</i>	<i>kobákobay</i> , or <i>balui</i> ; <i>bángora</i>	Green beans species, and others. They are cooked and served mixed in the <i>chinyoi</i> (spiced cooked vegetables) dish, or separately, often as midday meal or breakfast.
Cabbage	<i>Brassica</i> sp.	<i>shíta</i>	Grown in home gardens, and also sold to Dizi or other highland neighbour people on markets or to individual families

(continued)

Cassava	<i>Manihot esculenta</i>	<i>baura</i>	Cultivated in the home gardens or at the fringes of sorghum/maize fields. Not a central ingredient in the Suri diet, but seen as a 'hunger time food', easily growing, drought-tolerant and storable. It is used when cereal production has failed. The lower stem and root pieces of cassava are cooked and then dried in the sun for a day or two, to reduce the toxic substance (cyanide) before consumption
Pumpkin	<i>Cucurbita pepo</i>	<i>okondoy;</i> <i>kúngachi</i>	Grown in the home gardens. Marginal crop
Calabash (gourd)	<i>Lagenaria siceraria</i>	<i>kugúmi</i>	Grown in home gardens. Not food, but used for making containers
Root crops (sweet potato and taro)	<i>Ipomoea batatas;</i> <i>Colocasia esculenta</i>	<i>lógi;</i> <i>karínda</i>	Not much known; adopted by only a few households who took them over from Dizi farmer neighbours
Various 'reserve crops': finger millet, sorghum sub-varieties, vegetable species	<i>Eleusine coracana</i>	<i>barcha;</i> <i>kèttilee</i>	Not cultivated, little used or eaten but kept 'in living storage': they are planted in the home gardens to propagate the varieties, even if they are not used for food staple.

**Table 2.** Examples of gathered products in Suri

Product	Scientific name	Suei name	Remarks on use
Berries (in total ca. 20 species)	<i>Rhus natalensis;</i> <i>Carissa edulis;</i> <i>Ximenia americana;</i> <i>Tylosema</i> sp., and unidentified others	<i>keyáy;</i> <i>mírgári,</i> <i>lomai,</i> <i>b'alláy,</i> <i>gumurunyoi,</i> <i>kadagusay,</i> <i>yèlemugu,</i> <i>ginyani,</i> and others	Eaten as found, mainly by children
Tree fruits (more than 10 sp.)	<i>Tamarindus indica;</i> <i>Ficus</i> spp.; <i>Syzygium guineense</i>	<i>tubboy;</i> <i>luduri;</i> <i>shamoshi;</i> <i>b'uroshoy</i>	Eaten as found
Roots & leaves	Various trees and bushes	<i>dandil;</i> <i>lalang;</i> <i>barewari</i>	Boiled and eaten as supplement to daily porridge or milk
Mushrooms	-	<i>oshoy;</i> <i>búsukoy;</i> <i>gon-golay</i> <i>lemudurgani</i>	Gathered in moist places outside the villages; cooked or roasted
Tree seeds	-	<i>b'oray</i>	Oil from the crushed seeds can be used for cooking

The first three products—sorghum, maize and vegetables (esp. cabbage)—basically provide the staple foods, with only minor variations as to composition (in the porridge it is sorghum with some maize flour mixture, or sometimes with millet or the wild *Amaranthus* grain, eaten every day with *chinyoi*).<sup>(8)</sup>

Among the wild plant products gathered for consumption are those in the Table 2.

Gathered plant products are an essential ingredient of the Suri diet, giving it variety and being a fallback in times of scarcity. This partly explains why they never totally uproot bushes and trees when preparing new land for cultivation.

Non-plant products gathered are listed in the Table 3 below.

**Table 3.** Non-plant products gathered by the Suri

Product	Suri name	Remarks on production and use
Honey	<i>rètè</i>	Collected from beehives placed in trees, and from the wild. <sup>(9)</sup> Suri no longer sell honey as a cash crop, which was sometimes done in the 1960–80s. It was also made into a honey mead, called <i>gimay</i> , but this is now no longer produced either: too labour-intensive for women and today demand is dwarfed by <i>gèsò</i> and <i>aràqe</i> use (see below).
Ostrich eggs	<i>búrra rùm</i>	Some Suri occasionally eat the contents of the eggs, said to be good for the skin and against asthmatic problems.
Mineral salt	<i>mágái</i>	For human consumption. Found mainly near hot springs, e.g., in the southern Illib’ai hills near Dirga, but these were taken over by Nyangatom in the late 1990s, resulting in less consumption and the search for new places up north, but also more market purchase of imported salt in the highland towns, like Maji.
Mineral sand/salt	<i>uhu</i>	Taken by men with tobacco.
Cattle salt lick	<i>garsan</i>	For their cattle, the Suri use blocks of salt lick. Cattle are taken to several places across the Suri area where it can be found, or herd owners break off pieces and take it to the animals.

Non-food plants used by Suri are in the following Table 4.

Other food items of course come from livestock, provide most of the proteins, and are the most highly prized:

**Table 4.** Non-food plants used by Suri

Plant kinds	Suri name	Comments on use
Plants used for ‘cleansing’:		Produce ‘cleansing’ substances for the body, not counted as ‘food’ but more as medicine:
a) olive tree bark ( <i>Olea europaea</i> )	<i>girári</i>	- the crushed bark with water is used as an antithermic and in the case of malaria
b) <i>Ximenea americana</i>	<i>lomái</i>	- the fruit kernel oil is used for wound medicine
c) <i>Harrisonia abyssinica</i>	<i>dokái</i>	- crushed bark mixed with water is drunk by young men, to gain physical strength, especially in the rainy season when they prepare for ceremonial stick-duelling
Various other species (unidentified) <sup>(10)</sup>	<i>kambá;</i> <i>liliháy</i>	Crushed bark from these are also used as anti-malarial medicine, both found in the lowlands (For more examples, see Abbink, 2002c)

Meat is the most highly prized food but consumed sparsely. Roasted cattle meat is the rarest, and only eaten at ceremonial-ritual occasions, such as a burial, an intestine divination reading, a name-giving ceremony, a reconciliation ceremony, an initiation or at another kind of sacrifice. Also, when a cow or ‘favourite ox’ dies a natural death, the meat is roasted and eaten by villagers, relatives or age-set mates. It is taboo for the owner, being in sorrow, to eat of the meat of his own ox.

Suri consumption of the above livestock products was on average much higher than among the Dizi, Me’en and other farmer populations or most town dwellers. In contrast to Ethiopian highlanders, Suri traditionally did not eat raw meat, which they found ‘uncivilized’. Until about a decade or so ago, Suri males who had visited the markets, did not spend their money earned in drinks or meat consumption in the town bars, like most market goers—they wanted to save it to invest in their herds. But currently, some Suri government workers in Kibish, the district town, started doing this in the mixed settings of the town’s eating places, and also when Suri males now visit the markets in the highland area (Maji, Jeba, Tum, Dima) they often buy and eat meat in the butcher shops or the ‘restaurants’, either roasted or raw.

Suri augment their meat supply by hunting—mainly gazelle, buffalo, and antelope (like white-eared kob, dik-dik, Swayne’s hartebeest) but this is not a systematic practice; it occurs when young-male groups are travelling, and they see this ‘bush meat’ as an extra treat. They always roast this meat. They see it as free meat, not encumbered by socio-cultural rules that govern the slaughter and consumption of cattle meat (which however is seen as more important). Sometimes leopard, rhino, and giraffe were also hunted for, respectively, the skin, horns, and the tail hairs, but these animals were virtually gone by the late 1990s. In a season of hunger, or in the meagre months of May and June, Suri hunted more. Due to the hunting of antelopes in the Omo National Park and in the northern Akobo River Valley increasing in the past two decades, numbers are down. Suri traditionally also did some limited elephant hunting to get ritual objects made from the ivory, such as bracelets for the male members of the chiefly clan and for a horn used as a trumpet in certain ceremonies.<sup>(12)</sup> Hunting in the Omo National Park is now prohibited, but is occasionally done. External demand for certain wildlife products, in addition to commercial ‘sport hunting’ by tourists, rising local food and resource insecurity, and political unrest since the mid-1990s have led to the decimation of the wildlife in and around the national parks in the Bench-Maji and South Omo Zones. Suri and other local groups getting a bad deal from the government in local politics have difficulty to respect the state prohibition to hunt there, and the traditional curbs on hunting—which Suri respected with an eye to sustainability—have eroded. This erosion was also fueled by the wider availability of semi-automatic rifles.

As noted in the above (see Table 5), fishing is done by Suri in the Kibish (or Neegi) river, where there are at least eight species of fish (in S.: *urgusá*). Several are caught and eaten, especially by the Tirmaga sub-group. Suri have no taboo on fish, but it is only an occasional food source, mainly eaten by youths.

**Table 5.** Animal/livestock products in Suri

Product	Suri name	Notes on production and use
Milk and derived products: sour milk, curd, or ghee	<i>urá</i>	Highly prized food, consumed by herders in the cattle camps and also transported to the villages, for the women and young children.
Milk-blood mixture (drink)	<i>règge-hólá</i>	Drunk especially by young men in the cattle camps and liked for its supposedly giving strength and health. Sometimes women and teenage girls from the villages come to visit the camps to drink it. As with other pastoralists, like Maasai or Pokot, the blood is taken from the jugular neck-vein of healthy cows, opened with a well-aimed small arrow. <sup>(11)</sup>
Meat	<i>ayu</i>	a) meat roasted on a charcoal fire ( <i>ayuga-kòsá</i> ); or b) meat well-cooked in a pan ( <i>ayuga-kògòra</i> ). The latter is also called <i>róyó</i> and is either from goat, or goat mixed with cow meat.
Eggs	<i>búrra</i>	While the Suri keep chickens, they only eat the eggs, but rarely if at all consume the meat. They also sell the chickens on highland markets.
Fish	<i>urgusá</i>	Suri catch fish (several species) in the Kibish river. Mostly, young men catch them, and roast or dry them.

The above list provided the basic products and ingredients used for the Suri diet. The main ‘dishes’ prepared are in the following Table 6.

The Suri diet did not have sugar. Refined sugar is a new thing, used in tea and bread on offer in the towns. Suri who converted to Christianity (there are Evangelical-missionary churches, cf. Abbink, 2002b; 2004, which by 2016 had made several hundreds of converts) have to abandon alcoholic drinks, also at collective work parties, and instead drink tea with sugar, taken with bread. Traditionally, tea was viewed by Suri with disdain, as an ‘empty drink’ without food value. Before sugar, which is still not popular, the Suri yielded to the human preference for sweet food by taking young sorghum stalks to chew on, and since the late 1950s by cultivating and eating more maize.

The health effects of the Suri traditional diet seem rather positive: they did not suffer from coronary heart disease, diabetes, tooth decay, obesity, etc.<sup>(14)</sup> Suri foods—not widely known outside the Suri district—are, however, low in the national Ethiopian cultural food hierarchy as advertised in the country’s global tourist market discourse. In fact, in this context, the Suri *gèso* beer, the stiff porridge, and the milk-blood drinking custom are seen by highlanders and state representatives as ‘low status’ if not ‘backward’, as contrasted with the often more ‘refined’ and varied culinary complex of highland foods, with injera, sauces and stews, enset bread from Gurage, varied meat dishes, fish and numerous vegetable dishes (see ENI, 1982; Daniel, 1994), and they are rarely referred to.

**Table 6.** Main ‘dishes’ (food items) consumed

Dish	Suri name	Production and variety
Porridge	<i>tilá</i>	Made of sorghum flour and/or maize flour, mixed sometimes with milk. A staple food. There are three kinds: the lighter, softer <i>dáana</i> , with milk in it, the fresh <i>shalu</i> (a kind of hot sorghum gruel, but not beer), and the more thick-set <i>tilá</i> , a stiff porridge, a staple food also good to take during traveling (also called <i>gángili</i> , a loanword from Dizi). Fresh maize porridge is called <i>jalay</i> . As noted earlier, the term <i>tilá</i> has also become the general word for ‘food’.
Maize	<i>gora</i>	Rarely eaten separately: only as <i>batikái</i> , freshly ground kernels, taken mostly by kids or women. But it is nowadays also roasted as ‘popcorn’, easy to do and quickly ready; probably taken over from highlanders. Just when maize reaches maturity it is also eaten as <i>gora-ku-tisho</i> (‘fresh corn’) by children.
Leafy greens	<i>chinyoi</i>	Spiced and cooked vegetables or greens and cooked cabbage. Are well-seasoned, e.g., with peppers and other spices, they are a side dish to the sorghum porridge.
Corn/sorghum mix	<i>timáy</i>	Cooked mix of sorghum and/or maize kernels with beans. Often eaten for midday lunch.
Beer	<i>gèso</i>	Thick brew made of sorghum, maize and a fermenting agent called <i>b’ógúm</i> (= <i>Rhamnus prinoides</i> <sup>(15)</sup> ). Suri women brew four kinds of <i>gèso</i> , not to be described in detail here. The strongest and most popular one is <i>jendáy</i> . The <i>gèso</i> beer was originally not drunk daily, but only during weddings or collective work parties (e.g., for house building). Although now it is more common during market gatherings, and consumption is increasing, also among teenagers (see below).
Berries and fruits	Diverse names per species	A wide range is consumed according to the season, and often while traveling, not daily. Also some mushrooms.
Milk, and milk-blood mixture	<i>uró</i>	Drunk and consumed in various forms: fresh or sour, or as curd, cream, or ghee
Meat	<i>ayu</i>	Roasted/cooked meat. Much preferred, but not daily consumed. The occasions are important family or community or ritual events that emphasize sharing and sociality (and are embedded in reciprocity).
Eggs	<i>búrra</i>	Cooked eggs, taken with or without vegetables or porridge, and fried fish. Not a popular item.

Food and food production in Ethiopia seem also highly ‘politicized’. Commodities such as sugar and maize produced on state or foreign plantations are being included in a commercialized national agrarian economy, pitted against the traditional food production and valuation (and thereby well-being) of local producers, whose subsistence crops—sorghum, cabbage, beans, etc.—and even milk or meat (from cattle) are not easily marketed.<sup>(15)</sup> Neither have the local agricultural and agro-pastoral food producers ever received any state investment support. Even veterinary services, still given in the 1980s-early 1990s, are all but gone. In addition, rarely were agro-pastoralists given the scope to experiment or invest themselves, although this could have led to adaptive change (cf. Gérard, 1991).

An important element in the consumption pattern of the Suri is alcoholic drinks. We have seen this in the form of the food-like sorghum/maize beer (*gèso*). But new and problematic is the distilled drink *aräqé*, or also called *katikala*: the village bars outside the Suri area (but now also in Kibish, the new ‘capital’ of the Surma district, where the majority of inhabitants is non-Suri) serve this locally brewed hard liquor,<sup>(16)</sup> introduced by highlanders some twenty years ago. Indeed, many Suri buy it and take it to their villages (cf. Abbink, 2002a). In the mid-1990s, village highlander women and youngsters started going to Suri villages to try and sell the liquor. They were successful and it led to *aräqé* becoming a kind of status drink among the Suri. It was first consumed by male elders of the ‘reigning’ age grade, and later taken over by younger men and women. There is a certain ‘alcoholization’ of Suri society going on, an ambivalent and health-threatening process also seen elsewhere in Southern Ethiopia; the strong liquors have not yet been properly ‘absorbed’ into local drinking culture: local people usually consume it to excess, predictably stimulating drunken brawls, theft and robbery on market days. In February 2016, even the Tirmaga ritual leader (*komoru*) Bolegid’angi died, collapsing because of an overdose of alcohol (*aräqé*)—a ‘puzzling’ event inviting further study, due to its utter abnormality, going against the status and prestige a *komoru* normally has (although he was not yet fully inaugurated). There have been numerous cases of excited, drunk Suri (and others) that become engaged in disputes, grab their gun and start shooting. More than a hundred Suri people over the past year alone (2015–2016) died in such alcohol-triggered incidents. We see here a phenomenon of ‘over-consumption’, which also applies to Suri meat eating: in towns outside Suri society, these ‘food items’ are commodities beyond the moral sphere of family and reciprocity, only to be bought and consumed. This often leads to short-term excess.

## FOOD AND ITS RELATION TO IDENTITY

Can it be said that Suri foods are a cultural category and serve as a vehicle of (group) identity? Suri have a food pattern characteristic of other East African agro-pastoralists (see already Dyson-Hudson & Dyson-Hudson, 1970) and which is the result of adaptation to environmental and livelihood conditions. No doubt there is also an affective connection to their food, as evident in their positive remarks on it (‘promoting strength and bodily health’) and a commonly expressed loathing of farmers’ or highlanders’ diet, which is low in milk, blood and meat content and too rich in starchy foods, like the tough Dizi enset bread. The Suri also refer to their access to specific ‘medicinal’, antithermic products which they use to ‘clean’ their bodies and which highlanders do not have or use. Indeed, the Suri specific body aesthetics and desire for health makes them prefer by far their own dietary pattern and way of life above others.

Thus, Suri themselves see the way they exploit the environment for food resources, their ‘ethno-ecological’ knowledge of it, and their diet as providing



for this specific way of life, as opposed to and better than that of neighbouring peoples (although they recalled many similarities with the food and diet of their southern agro-pastoralist neighbours the Nyangatom). The greatest contrast was with the Dizi, whose foods they were indifferent to, or disliked. To be ‘Suri’ is to have a certain core diet, consisting of the products mentioned above. Food in Suri culture was not externalized as saleable or in demand by others: it was only exchanged in familial and ritual contexts. The emergence of beer markets in the Suri area in the late 1990s has changed this: they are partly the result of the need of women for cash and also of family tension and breakdown. The *gèso*—formerly a food item provided only during collective work parties, weddings, duelling arenas, or sometimes brought to the men in the herding camps—is now so widely available that it has almost become a daily food intake for adults.

Suri do not necessarily say that to be Suri one does, or must, consume ‘Suri foods’ like those above, as there are more criteria. But outsiders identify them with their food, in a largely negative way. I remember that when I first went down to the Suri villages for fieldwork, the village highlanders asked me: But what will you eat there? There is no food.

#### VULNERABILITIES IN FOOD PRODUCTION: CRISES, ‘COPING’ AND SURVIVAL

Traditionally, risk is unavoidable in the Suri agro-pastoral system and is of four kinds:

- Drought. It is periodic and affects cultivation and livestock pastures. Usually it is met by sale of cattle for grain and temporary migration, but also by occasional raiding of food supplies of neighbouring groups. There are reported cases of Suri attacks on Me’en and Dizi villages, stealing grain crops.<sup>(17)</sup>

- Cattle disease. It is not rampant but an epidemic can suddenly decimate family livestock property and cut milk production. Suri distinguish at least eight kinds of cattle disease, among them trypanosomiasis, rinderpest (in the past), bovine pleuro-pneumonia, foot and mouth disease, anthrax, and liver disease, and have some traditional medicine, but not strong ones. Veterinary services are sporadic and have declined in the past 15 years.

- The scarcity of food (sorghum, maize) at the end of the dry season, in the months of May to July (when the harvest is due). People then eke out a living by reducing their food intake, and turning more to hunting and gathering. Usually the Suri were successful in solving the problems themselves, e.g., getting cash by their gold trading and buying food with it (cf. Abbink, 1993). In recent decades there have been three serious droughts causing famine-like conditions: in 1984 (which was a disaster year across Ethiopia),<sup>(18)</sup> in 1994 and in 2003. Some external food aid was eventually provided.

- Raiding by neighbouring groups on Suri, affecting family wealth and the safety of cattle camps, fields and village settlements. Indeed, insecurity is now

a crucial factor in producing food insecurity and diet change among Suri: there is a pattern of long-term inter-ethnic conflict, notably with Nyangatom and Toposa, but also with the Me'en people to the east. This has been a permanent factor damaging their livelihoods for at least twenty years. I discussed this before (Abbink, 2000; 2009), but the impact of permanent instability has grown worse to such an extent that the Suri herding way of life is in danger.<sup>(19)</sup> While some Suri herd owners are disproportionately hit and may have lost virtually their entire herd, most others have suffered losses of 10 to 20% of their animals.<sup>(20)</sup> The food scarcity period in May–July is aggravated by group conflict, affecting more people than the Suri, and features theft, raiding and other violence. Often, as a result of clashes, the harvest of sorghum or maize on the fields is spoiled or partly destroyed in fighting. In some cases, crops cannot be harvested or processed because of the women being killed or having moved away.

Since the late 1990s the decisive insecurity factor for the Suri was the expansion of the Toposa, the agro-pastoral people of South Sudan which have been growing at an exponential rate (now ca. 300,000 to 400,000) and have become a regional political force, although not a united one. They are well-armed and also pressure the Turkana in North Kenya and the Ilemi Triangle, and other peoples in South Sudan, such as the Didinga, Jiye and Narim (Boya). Since the early 2010s, almost any place in Suri country had become susceptible to raiding from the Toposa, and while the Ethiopian government facilitated several rounds of 'peace talks' in 2007–2008 no permanent agreement was reached. The government has not taken any action either to secure the border with South Sudan.<sup>(21)</sup> For the Suri this has led to a) shrinking pastures and significant loss of cattle, their primary wealth and means of livelihood and social reproduction (as e.g., in marriage alliances). The Toposa-Nyangatom expansion has led to Suri retreating from all prime grazing areas near Mt. Naita (Shulugui); and b) to insecurity of the agrarian production cycle, as even the cultivation sites are subject to raiding (see above). It leads to frequent shifting or abandonment of plots, and smaller harvests.

A most important risk factor today, however, seems to be state policy: it ranges from military recruitment (from the *Derg* time to today),<sup>(22)</sup> to land confiscation, and villagization/resettlement. This has affected food production, the agrarian cycle, security, the environment, and the local adaptation or 'coping' mechanisms. Modern state policy purports to bring 'development' (cf. Wagstaff, 2015). This has become the greatest challenge because it 'targets' all local ethnic groups, who live by agro-pastoralism, hunting and gathering, and subsistence cultivation. Under the regime of the EPRDF, the Omo Valley and its people are subject to major transformative processes, characterized by large-scale commercial agriculture via plantations and irrigation schemes that empty the Omo River, threaten the pasture lands and transhumance routes,<sup>(23)</sup> and limit the agricultural production of locals. The state company Ethiopian Sugar Corporation had the plan to construct ca. 245,000 ha. of sugar plantations, five sugar-cane crushing factories, and aimed to import tens of thousands of workers from outside the area, to be housed in new labour towns—a much discussed and probably long-

term ill-fated venture (cf. Kamski, 2016 for an overview). While the scale of these plans was somewhat reduced in 2016, the process is ongoing. Although it in principle still leaves spaces for agro-pastoralism, there is fragmentation of pasture areas and lack of access to water sources (despite the company in 2015 building a bridge across the river and a few crossings under the main irrigation channel, to be used for local cattle, Kamski, 2016: 5). Part of the master plan is the forced congregation of the local ethnic groups in new ‘resettlement villages’, with a limited area for subsistence cultivation. Problem here is that the local groups were never asked their opinion or preferences on anything regarding the future of the area, including food production. The state also planned this transformation of the Omo Valley in the absence of a national ecological master plan.

According to policy documents, the Ethiopian government thus aims to subvert agro-pastoralism and force the people to settle and become farmers or labourers. This is according to a familiar scenario used in many developing countries: sedentarization, villagization, a phasing out of pastoralism, and flouting civil rights.<sup>(24)</sup> Such policies are also denying several UN resolutions and numerous think-tank and NGO studies which demonstrate that respecting and developing (agro-)pastoralism can be very beneficial and morally preferable because of economic benefits and maintaining the rights and dignity of local producers.

The latter approach so far largely being absent, the only way that Suri can make a living and gain serious income to rebuild their herds and sustain themselves, is alluvial *gold mining*. They have been pioneers in developing this artisanal mining, by finding new places and by supplying most of the gold to the markets in the towns, although they become victim of monopolisation of the trade by highland traders.<sup>(25)</sup> While the work of mining is risky and insecure, due to attacks by Nyangatom and Toposa, and robbery on the roads, Suri continue this profitable work. Both young men and women in separate groups team up to spend a couple of weeks in a mining place and work, although each keeps individually what s/he finds. In mid-2016, one gram yielded ca. 650 *birr* (= \$ 28–30) in the chief market place, Kibish town, where an association of traders is established.<sup>(26)</sup> In Maji and Dima it is traded for a higher price (780 *birr* per gram, ca. \$ 33–35), but these are more distant and more dangerous places, due to road robbery). In all the market places, the traders try to trick the Suri with false scales.<sup>(27)</sup> Still, gold is the main cash lifeline that the Suri have, and is now essential for their survival: they also increasingly buy food supplies (grain, sorghum beer, meat) with it, as well as cattle.

The need for gold that yields cash also indicates the ongoing monetization of the Suri economy and its becoming connected to the wider regional economy of the area. The danger to the Suri is the state effort to ‘regulate’ and usurp the gold mining and trading, privileging their own people with permits to explore and to mine, and pushing out Suri. This has often happened (cf. Wagstaff, 2015: 16, 20, 25). The other factor is that of Nyangatom-Toposa attacks on Suri near the gold places, with dozens of victims. This has led to Suri often moving out and searching for new places to pan gold.

## THE CONTEXT OF CHANGE: IMPOSITION AND ADAPTATION

Like any food system or culinary tradition, the Suri one is not static but subject to adaptation and change. Suri are not a homogenous group and some sections of the people, like high school and a few university students, government workers and policemen, live in a town setting and change their diets, as they obviously tend to eat what is available there—but many also keep receiving food from their families. Equally, Suri political representatives (regional and national parliament members: around a dozen since 1995 have served as Suri District representatives) have to conform to the food of others, mainly to the ‘pan-Ethiopian’ dishes such as tea and bread, fatty dumplings, *firfir* (dry, crumbled *injera* with some red sauce mixed in), or *qocčo* (enset bread) as breakfast or lunch; *injera* and *wät’* or a roasted meat dish (*t’ibs*), etc., as lunch or supper, drunk with high sugar-content soft drinks or factory brand beer. This is the emerging ‘diet of modernity’ and will be spread actively.

Imposed or forced changes in lifestyle, including diet, are viewed by Suri with much ambivalence, but proceed inexorably in this time of crisis and transition, which affects them deeply. Their society has been in disarray and internal tension since the early 1990s (see Abbink, 2000; 2009) and they did not have the adaptive capacity to turn this around—community leadership, family life, subsistence production and livestock herding are all under heavy stress and these problems have reinforced one another.

My survey of ca. 22 Chai-Suri households over the past 20 years has shown that in the 1990s they were much better off in their all-round food intake and composition of diet. Alcohol consumption was also much less problematic than today. There is in fact serious deterioration in most households, although less so among those who still live in non-villagized settings, who could maintain their fields and cattle, and who kept away from the towns. Furthermore, all of the households by 2014 were affected by the loss of family members, not only due to infectious disease or malaria, but more due to violence (killings). It also appeared that all of them suffered loss of family cattle due to raiding, that food production was more precarious, and that the poverty rate of most families had increased. Among the families surveyed, the number of widows had increased, and with it, their difficulty of caring for children and making a living. The latter was mostly brewing *gèso* beer for sale on one of the local markets. A significant minority of children had been orphaned, others were born out of wedlock or not recognized by their father, leading to insecurity and confusion. Many fathers refused to allocate enough resources to the mother or to the kids, who often had to fend for themselves.

Among the Suri, the production and consumption of food in the 2010s has therefore become a much more disorganized and unpredictable business, whereby the so-called ‘traditional food system’ is under stress at the same time that household and gender relations have shown crisis. Main features of this social ‘decline’ on the diet are:

- a) a slow shift from sorghum cultivation and consumption to maize
- b) lower intake of vegetables, greens and berries and fruits, due to loss of

areas for gathering products, and due to instability of the settlement pattern, reducing the yield of home garden products

c) less intake of milk, blood and meat in families due to stagnation or decline of herds, caused by insecurity and more forced mobility, and loss of income.

As a general result of this it seems that the overall variety and health of the Suri diet is reduced.

Furthermore, alcohol (ab)use among the Suri is a major problematic feature and would require a separate study due to its being the focus of multiple lines of change: generational, gender, economic and cultural. The use of alcohol has skyrocketed and is an indicator of the disarray in family life and social organization, of declining dietary provision and of production system changes. I limit myself here to concluding that the abuse of alcoholic drinks has led to numerous brawls with a deadly outcome, to widowed women and young unmarried girls brewing local beer to gain cash to compensate for loss of family or husband's economic support, and to neglect of regular food production. There are elements of 'self-destruction' present here. Many male Suri also started to drink because of personal despair at having lost their cattle in raids by enemies or by government punitive action. The government did not put curbs on alcohol production and sales, although early in 2016 the chairman of the Surma-*woreda* council (a Suri himself) issued a prohibition on *gèsò* markets.

The villagization campaign that has been going on since ca. 2008, imposed by the government and obliging the Suri to live more closely together in villages with corrugated-roof huts (Amharic: *qorqorro-bét*) of bad quality,<sup>(28)</sup> has led to more fights between people, to smaller home gardens, to loss of stored crops to rats, and to more rapid decline of resources in the vicinity of the new villages. A bizarre detail was that when the Suri were urged into these villages, they were promised 'food aid' and even advised not to cultivate for the first one or two years, as 'the government would provide'. This hardly proved to be true; what was given was only maize, said to be of bad quality (cf. Wagstaff, 2015: 29), which the Suri women found was not fit for food but only for the brewing of *gèsò* beer. They did so and with the proceeds of the beer they bought better quality grain. Suri soon found that life in the new villages was economically not an improvement and often, initiated by the women, left after one season to go to areas where they could cultivate more land. They had accepted the new 'houses' because they were offered free and came with a food package of maize (see above). But many of them are still empty or kept only as a temporary abode. In this respect, the Suri have spontaneously 'resettled', away from the villagization sites, in order to improve their livelihoods and food production.

In fact, the villagization effort so far reduced food security and 'nutritional agency' of the Suri: less production, more dependency, cut off from access to gathering resources (now more remote), and for some reason they were obliged to cultivate certain crops like maize or onions. But these were not successful as cash crops.

At the same time, the development and administrative incorporation of the Suri into state structures has led to more education, more Suri men engaged

(although sporadically) in the local administration, a few starting as traders, some working in towns outside the area (e.g., in Mizan or Hawassa), and also several men taking up temporary jobs at plantations, as guards or manual workers. For instance, there are a few Suri working at the state Salamago plantation east of the Omo River. Thus a new stratum of salary-dependent Suri is emerging in the towns that in terms of food and diet gradually is familiarized with 'restaurant' foods there, meaning bread, tea with sugar, *injera* and sauces (*wät'*), pasta, roasted goat/sheep/cow meat (*t'ibs*), soft drinks, and above all, alcoholic drinks. However, within Suri households the town food items are not prepared and the traditional dishes remain. Suri women do not incorporate 'town foods' into the diet.

## CONCLUSION

The Suri food system was a simple but nutritionally adequate one, based on complementary agro-pastoral production, and products from hunting and gathering. This system, embedded in relations of reciprocal exchange and symbolism (e.g., around male ceremonial dueling, the aesthetics of body culture, and community ritual), is still there in its basic elements but is under pressure. Pastoral practices are on the decline, eroding the Suri's wealth and diet, and there is pressure on them to change the crops cultivated. Suri food items and diet are frequently still seen by outsiders and state representatives as 'primitive' and 'lacking' variety and nutritional value, although good alternatives are not offered. The food system of the Suri is resilient and not easily replaced, but some groups, like the educated youngsters and those engaged in local administration, the police/militia, or other town activities, are gradually changing their food consumption habits due to exposure to other dishes in the context of the educational settings and the government offices. In town, they are dependent on buying the food available at the inns (Amh: *migib bét*), with the income of their salaried jobs. As we saw, Suri food production is more irregular and the family system disrupted, not allowing the same rhythm of procurement and consumption in organized familial settings like in the past. For the state administration, their projected development of Suri from 'unsettled nomads' to cultivating villagers implies a change of food practices as well.

Suri struggle to keep well-nourished in a double sense: nutritionally and as to well-being, i.e., culturally. But it is clear that their food production, the food items and their diet are challenged, due to the environmental, social and political reasons mentioned. There is more 'resource competition' with neighbouring groups on water, pasture and cattle, continued unreliable rainfall (as climate change will make itself be felt), less pasture, massive 'cultural propaganda', and material encroachment of state and other 'investors' on their lands. The expansion of the state plantations is subverting cattle pasture routes, and the villagization effort limits their mobility, cultivation and their herd size. The state message—'be modern' by changing food production habits and stop 'harmful



culture'—is persistent. Paradoxically of course, frequent alcohol consumption, widespread in highland culture,<sup>(29)</sup> is not labelled as harmful by the state, although hard liquor has wrought havoc among the Suri and other peoples in the South-west—and it was introduced by highlanders. So-called food aid is given to the villagizing Suri in a time of adaptation to 'resettled life', but has the effect of impoverishing their diet (e.g., from sorghum to maize; less vegetables, less milk, no gathering of wild species due to rapid local depletion), making them dependent, and trying to undermine their previously wide range of cultivation, gathering and herding skills. One motivation for resenting socio-economic and dietary change is the Suri's wish to remain independent also in food choice and consumption, and in general to retain their own social group life and identity.

Another important motivation for open and tacit resistance of Suri towards the developmental changes and dietary innovations was briefly mentioned: *aesthetics*. Especially the youngsters value their body culture and health habits that, despite some problems (e.g., of infectious disease and hygiene), have been culturally rewarding and distinctive *vis-à-vis* other groups: in shaping and decorating the body, and in enhancing physical ability (e.g., for ceremonial dueling, defense, hard work at house-building or in the fields).

The ambivalence in food dynamics between acceptance and rejection, however, noted in other studies of changing food cultures, is also there: e.g., without realizing what was happening, Suri have embraced hard liquor in the form of *arāqé/katikala*, and as we saw this has created, or rather aggravated, major social problems: excessive drinking, marriage and family disputes, child neglect, brawls and killings due to intoxication. A discourse of doubt and regret has emerged deploring this, e.g., in the context of emerging Evangelical Christianity, but this has so far not been able to undermine the new economic anchoring of alcohol production and sale within Suri society. Many married women and widows simply depend on the sale of *gèso* beer, and imported *arāqé/katikala* is now a prestige commodity, given or exchanged at weddings and funerals or by guests visiting the *komoru* (the ritual leaders).

The status of food and diet among the Suri is becoming 'insecure' in a wider, socio-cultural sense. Changes in the diet and the food consumption of the Suri are connected to the changing political economy in the region. The latter impacts on their material conditions of production and their group identity. As we saw, the changes reflect the social problems and the internal tensions that they are experiencing, next to showing (forced) economic change and processes of cultural hegemonism, making them dependent on others, notably state forces. While Suri may gradually adapt to new conditions, the recent social, economic and food production changes will lead to significant mutations of food item choice and intake, food symbolism and group identity, and thus to overall reduced Suri 'food sovereignty', not of their own choice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS This paper was written under a visiting fellowship at the Graduate School of Asian and African Areas Studies (ASAFAS), Kyoto University, in



2016. I express my gratitude to the Division for African Area Studies at ASAFAS, and in particular to Prof. Masayoshi Shigeta, Dr. Morie Kaneko and Ms. T. Numata, for their assistance and hospitality. I am also very grateful to the anonymous ASM reviewers for critical comments that allowed me to substantially improve the paper.

## NOTES

- (1) In 1992–1993, 1994, 1999, 2010, 2011 and 2014.
- (2) Studies on food and food systems as socio-cultural phenomena are numerous. For some overviews, see Mintz & Dubois, 2002; Sutton, 2010; Tierney & Ohnuki-Tierney, 2012; Dirks & Hunter, 2013; Crowther, 2013; also the widely used anthology of Counihan & Van Esterik, 2008.
- (3) Cf. the recent study by US researcher Q. Wagstaff, 2015.
- (4) In 1989 Huss-Ashmore (1989: 22) mentioned it as long being ‘a relatively neglected subject’, but this has been remedied in the past decades with a remarkable spate of anthropological studies on food culture and diet: cf. Mintz & Dubois, 2002; Sutton, 2010; Crowther, 2013 for general surveys.
- (5) Not all the places could be identified on maps. The presence of Suri in Sudan is hinted at in late 19th and early 20th century travel accounts, e.g., Bulpett, 1907; Hodson, 1929, and others, and is mentioned in Suri oral historical narratives. Linguistically and culturally the Suri are also related to the Didinga and Boya (Narim) peoples, living in the Boya Hills of South Sudan, southwest of the Toposa area. See for a pioneer study on the Narim, Fukui, 1996.
- (6) Block II comprises a projected 81,255 ha., not counting the private farms that are planned. Notable is also the large overlap of the sugar plantations with the Omo National Park and with the UNESCO World Heritage site in the area of Block II.
- (7) It can be predicted that the massive irrigation to be applied here for monoculture cropping will have negative impact on the environment, as soil crusting and salinity will increase. Soils here are fragile and low in nutrients. In addition, the drop in the water level of the Omo River will have multiple other negative effects on local economic systems, biodiversity and group relations.
- (8) Suri probably cultivated more millet (perhaps also other varieties) in the past than today, and went on to adapt to sorghum varieties as they settled closer to the Ethiopian highland areas. There are also Suri oral traditions saying that in the past (19th century) they had much less cattle than now.
- (9) Sometimes while travelling they find bee colonies, often with the help of the honey bird called *shagam* (= the ‘greater honeyguide’, or Indicator indicator), and empty them for the honey combs. Cf. Bruce Bower, ‘Humans, birds communicate to collaborate’, in ScienceNews, July 2, 2016 ([www.sciencenews.org/article/humans-birds-communicate-collaborate](http://www.sciencenews.org/article/humans-birds-communicate-collaborate), accessed August 6, 2016).
- (10) I do not mention the various ritual plants that are not eaten but used in wedding, protective, healing and other ceremonies. This category is called *kéyay* tumuyn (‘God’s plants’). The home gardens also produce tobacco, which is used as a ‘ritual’ plant used in negotiations and certain parts of the burial rite.
- (11) Demonstrated in this video clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jw95c5RbA-s>.
- (12) When a couple of years ago village traders from highland villages (like Jeba) offered a big sum of money for rhino horn and for ivory (illegal), Suri took it up.
- (13) Also widely used in highland culture drinks like *t’alla* and *t’äjj*. In Amharic: *gesho*.

- The Suri grain beer is more coarse than the highland *borde* and usually has more alcohol content.
- (14) Suri did not report such diseases, and data of the local clinics in Tum and Maji confirmed this. Their main health problems were related to lack of hygiene in preparing food, intestinal parasites and gastro-intestinal problems, and to infections of burn and gunshot wounds.
  - (15) Distance, weak market access, and consumer preferences play a role. Remarkably, Suri have even had trouble in recent years selling oxen and bulls on the local village markets. Often cultural prejudices seem to play a role, e.g., the rejection by village buyers of cattle with ‘strangely shaped horns’. The Suri could sell or exchange them with fellow agro-pastoralists like Nyangatom, Toposa or other local groups like the Me’en, but here relations of raiding and theft rather than buying and selling predominate.
  - (16) Can have ca. 35–50% alcohol content.
  - (17) Fieldwork information, 1994, 1999, 2003.
  - (18) Some Suri were even resettled in a highland area, although unsuccessfully (cf. Abbink, 1992).
  - (19) See the disturbing paper by Wagstaff, 2015.
  - (20) Herd size of an adult married man could be from ca. 80 to 130 animals. Young unmarried men are still building their herd and have from 10 to 40 animals. They need animals to be able to marry (bride wealth, now ca. 15–20 head of cattle). Fathers also have to give when a son marries. The largest herd was owned by the Chai-Suri ritual chief (*komoru*), but also this one was decimated by raiding in the past few years.
  - (21) The last incident as I write this (in the summer of 2016) was a Toposa raid, with close to two hundred raiders, in the western Suri area in July 2016, when ca. 5,000 cattle, the stock of almost a hundred Suri households, were stolen.
  - (22) In 1999 the EPRDF government took a hundred Suri young men for the national army, under false pretenses: they were to be trained as local militia to defend their area. But they were sent to the northern warfront with Eritrea. Only a handful returned.
  - (23) See Mohammud, 2007, for a study on the very weak legal position of pastoralists in Ethiopia.
  - (24) A disastrous scenario for pastoralism and the environment has unfolded in China, where due to misguided policies a calamity of national proportions is in progress: see T. Lessokallow, *Das Ende der Nomaden oder die Entstehung einer Öko-Katastrophe*, Deutschlandfunk, 17-6-2016 ([http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/china-das-ende-der-nomaden-oder-die-entstehung-einer-oeko.1170.de.html?dram:article\\_id=357491](http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/china-das-ende-der-nomaden-oder-die-entstehung-einer-oeko.1170.de.html?dram:article_id=357491)) (Accessed October 8, 2016).
  - (25) Mostly from Tigray and Wollo. The Tigray traders are mostly newcomers having arrived after ca. 1995, and the Wolloye partly descendants of people from this northern Amhara region who came as traders in the 1930s and afterwards.
  - (26) The head of this association, a man from Tigray, was arrested in February 2016, after he tried to leave the area with the association’s funds (ca. 500,000 *birr* = \$ 24,000). Corruption and bribing in the area is rampant and affects all institutions. Predictably, it is called ‘eating money’ and is a national sport.
  - (27) The gold trade is a complex business, not to be discussed here in more detail; locally there are means to check the right weight. The price of one gram of gold given by the banks was ca. 1,200 *birr*.
  - (28) Built under a PCDP scheme (Pastoralist Community Development Programme), financed by the World Bank. It has not developed any community; on the contrary (see for a picture of the new ‘house’: Oakland Institute, 2014: 13, and of a traditional house

on p. 6).

- (29) From the more traditional *t'äjj*, *t'älla* and *aräqé* to imported prestige liquors, especially whiskey. Cf. also Abbink, 2002a; Yeraswork & Ezana, 2010.

## REFERENCES

- Abbink, J. 1992. Settling the Surma: notes on an Ethiopian relief experiment. *Human Organisation*, 51: 174–180.
- 1993. Famine, guns, and gold: The Suri, 1985–91. *Disasters*, 17: 218–225.
- 2000. Restoring the balance: Violence and culture among the Suri of Southern Ethiopia. In (G. Aijmer & J. Abbink, eds.) *Meanings of Violence: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, pp. 77–100. Berg, Oxford-New York.
- 2002a. Drinking, prestige and power: alcohol use and cultural hegemony in Maji, southern Ethiopia. In (D.F. Bryceson, ed.) *Alcohol in Africa: Mixing Business, Pleasure, and Politics*, pp. 161–177. Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.
- 2002b. Paradoxes of power and culture in an old periphery: Surma, 1974–98. In (W. James, D.L. Donham, E. Kurimoto & A. Triulzi, eds.) *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After*, pp. 155–172. James Currey, Oxford; Addis Ababa University Press, Addis Ababa; Ohio University Press, Athens, USA.
- 2002c. Plant use among the Suri people of southern Ethiopia: A system of knowledge in danger? *Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere*, 70: 199–206.
- 2004. Converting pastoralists: Reflections on missionary work and development in southern Ethiopia. In (A. Kumar Giri, A. van Harskamp & O. Salemink, eds.) *The Development of Religion, the Religion of Development*, pp. 133–142. Eburon, Delft.
- 2009. The fate of the Suri: Conflict and group tension on the Southwest Ethiopian frontier. In (G. Schlee & E.E. Watson, eds.) *Changing Identifications and Alliances in Northeast Africa. Volume I. Ethiopia and Kenya*, pp. 35–51. Berghahn, Oxford, New York.
- Abbink, J., K. Askew, D. Feyissa Dori, E. Fratkin, E.C. Gabbert, J. Galaty, S. LaTosky, J. Lydall, H.A. Mahmoud, J. Markakis, G. Schlee, I. Strecker & D. Turton 2014. *Lands of the Future: Transforming Pastoral Lands and Livelihoods in Eastern Africa*. Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), (Working paper 154).
- Avery, S. 2012. *Lake Turkana & the Lower Omo: Hydrological Impacts of Major Dam & Irrigation Development, Volume 1*. African Studies Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford.
- Behnke, R. & C. Kerven 2013. *Counting the Costs: Replacing Pastoralism with Irrigated Agriculture in the Awash Valley*. IIED, London.
- Berhanu, B., A.M. Melesse & Y. Seleshi 2013. GIS-based hydrological zones and soil geodatabase of Ethiopia. *Catena*, 104: 21–31.
- Berihun, A.G. 2016. Unsustainable the sustainable: An evaluation of the legal and policy interventions for pastoral development in Ethiopia. *Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice*, 6: 2. Online. <https://pastoralismjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s13570-016-0049-x>
- Bulpett, C.W.L. 1907. *A Picnic Party in Wildest Africa*. Edward Arnold, London.
- Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) 2015. *Sustainable Livestock Production? Industrial Agriculture versus Pastoralism*. Centre for Development and Environment, Bern Policy Brief no. 7: 6. Online. <http://knowledge4food.net/knowledge-portal-item/sustainable-livestock-production-industrial-agriculture-versus-pastoralism/>

- Chrzan, J. 2013. Nutritional anthropology. In (K. Albala, ed.) *Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies*. Routledge, New York–London.
- Coalition of Pastoralist Civil Society Organisations (COPACSO) 2015. Pastoralism: A Media Handbook. Coalition of Pastoralist Civil Society Organisations, Kampala. Online. <http://www.copasco.org/files/downloads/COPASCO-2015-Pastoralism-media-handbook.pdf> (Accessed August 3, 2016)
- Counihan, C. & P. van Esterik 2008. *Food and Culture: A Reader (2nd edition)*. Routledge, New York–London.
- Crowther, G. 2013. *Eating Culture. An Anthropological Guide to Food*. University of Toronto Press, North York.
- Daniel J.M. 1994. *Exotic Ethiopian Cooking: Society, Culture, Hospitality, and Traditions (Rev. Extended Edition. 178 Tested Recipes. With Food Composition Tables)*. Ethiopian Cookbook Enterprises, Addis Ababa.
- Dirks, R. & G. Hunter 2013. The anthropology of food. In (K. Albala, ed.) *Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies*. Routledge, New York–London.
- Dyson-Hudson, R. & N. Dyson-Hudson 1970. The food production system of a seminomadic society: The Karimojong, Uganda. In (P.F.M. McLoughlin, ed.) *African Food Production Systems*, pp. 92–123. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Ellison, J. 2012. The intimate violence of political and economic change in Southern Ethiopia. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54: 35–64.
- Ethiopian Nutritional Institute (ENI) 1982. *Traditional Recipes of Ethiopia*. Ethiopian Nutritional Institute, Addis Ababa.
- Fana Gebresenbet 2015. Securitisation of development in Ethiopia: The discourse and politics of developmentalism. *Review of African Political Economy*, 41(sup1): S64–S74.
- 2016. Land acquisitions, the politics of dispossession, and state-remaking in Gambella, Western Ethiopia. *Africa Spectrum*, 51: 5–28.
- Fox, R. 2002. Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective. Social Issues Research Centre, Oxford. Online. [http://www.sirc.org/publik/food\\_and\\_eating\\_0.html](http://www.sirc.org/publik/food_and_eating_0.html) (Accessed July 10, 2016).
- Fratkin, E., E.A. Roth & M.A. Nathan 2004. Pastoral sedentarization and its effects on children's diet, health, and growth among Rendille of Northern Kenya. *Human Ecology*, 32: 531–559.
- Fukui, K. 1996. Conflict as a levelling mechanism—analysis of cattle composition and raiding among the Narim in South Sudan. *Nilo-Ethiopian Studies*, 3-4: 1–23.
- Gérard, D. 1991. Oasian agriculture and camel harnessed traction: A new initiative of the Afar pastoralists of the Awash Valley in Ethiopia for complementary food production. *Nomadic Peoples*, 29: 42–52.
- Grivetti, L.A. 1978. Nutritional success in a semi-arid land: Examination of Tswana agropastoralists of the eastern Kalahari, Botswana. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 31: 1204–1220.
- Hodson, A.W. 1929. *Where Lion Reign*. Skeffington & Son, London.
- Holtzman, J. 2007. Eating time: Capitalist history and pastoralist history among Samburu herders in Northern Kenya. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 1: 436–448.
- 2009. *Uncertain Tastes. Memory, Ambivalence and the Politics of Eating in Samburu, Northern Kenya*. University of California Press, Berkeley–Los Angeles.
- Huss-Ashmore, R. 1989. Perspectives on the African food crisis. In (R. Huss Ashmore & S.H. Katz, eds.) *African Food Systems in Crisis: Microperspectives*. Gordon & Breach, Langhorne, USA.
- International Fund for Agricultural (IFAD) 2010. *Livestock and Pastoralism (Livestock The-*

- matic Papers*). International Fund for Agricultural Development, Rome.
- Kamski, B. 2016. *The Kuraz Sugar Development Project*. Omo-Turkana Basin Research Network, Oxford (Briefing Note 1: 7).
- Leenaars, J.G.B., A.J.M. van Oostrum & M.R. Gonzalez 2014. Africa Soil Profiles Database Version 1.2. ISRIC -World Soil Information, Wageningen. Online. [http://library.wur.nl/isric/fulltext/isricu\\_i34023\\_001.pdf](http://library.wur.nl/isric/fulltext/isricu_i34023_001.pdf) (Accessed May 25, 2017).
- Lokuruka, M.N.I. 2006. Meat is the meal and status is by meat: Recognition of rank, wealth, and respect through meat in Turkana culture. *Food and Foodways*, 14: 201–229.
- Mintz, S.W. & C.M. Dubois 2002. The anthropology of food and eating. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31: 99–119.
- Mohammud, A. 2007. The legal status of the communal land holding system in Ethiopia: The case of pastoral communities. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 14: 85–125.
- Oakland Institute 2013. *Ignoring Abusing in Ethiopia- DfID and USAID in the Lower Omo Valley*. Oakland Institute, Oakland, Canada.
- 2014. *Engineering Ethnic Conflict: The Tool of Ethiopia's Plantation Development on the Suri People*. Oakland Institute, Oakland, Canada.
- Richards, A. 1939. *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Sassen, S. 2014. *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*. Harvard University Press/The Belknap Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Schiavoni, C.M. 2016. The contested terrain of food sovereignty construction: Toward a historical, relational and interactive approach. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44: 1–32.
- Sutton, D.E. 2010. Food and the senses. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 39: 209–223.
- Tierney, R.K. & E. Ohnuki-Tierney 2012. Anthropology of food. In (J.M. Pilcher, ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Food History*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199729937.013.0007
- Tsegaye M. 2015. Listening to their silence? The political reaction of affected communities to large-scale land acquisitions: insights from Ethiopia. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 42: 517–539.
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) 2007. *The Future of Pastoralism in Ethiopia*. UN OCHA Pastoralist Communication Initiative, Addis Ababa.
- Wagstaff, Q.A. 2015. *Development, Cultural Hegemonism and Conflict Generation in South-west Ethiopia: Agro-Pastoralists in Trouble*. Université Montesquieu (Sciences Po-LAM, Observatoire des Enjeux Politiques et Sécuritaires dans la Corne de l'Afrique), Bordeaux.
- Yeraswork, A. & A. Ezana 2010. *The Aräqe Dilemma: The Socioeconomics of Traditional Distilled Alcohol Production, Marketing, and Consumption in Ethiopia*. Forum for Social Studies, Addis Ababa.

——— Accepted January 27, 2017

Author's Name and Address: Jon ABBINK, *Research Professor African Studies, VU University, Amsterdam, and Senior Researcher, African Studies Centre, Leiden University, P.O. Box 9555, 2300 RB Leiden, The NETHERLANDS.*

E-mail: [abbink\[at\]ascleiden.nl](mailto:abbink[at]ascleiden.nl)