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Suri Images: the Return of Exoticism and the Commodification of an Ethiopian “Tribe”*

One of the less attractive aspects of “development” in Africa is the expansion of consumerist tourism directed at what are called the “last remaining primitive or vanishing tribes” of the world. This *topos* of the “native tribes” is familiar from *colonial* discourse, which had both political and cultural aspects and expressed claims to hegemony. But in current postcolonial conditions, images of primeval indigeneity and “tribal identity” are being recycled in amazing fashions within new discursive formations, driven by tourism and mass TV viewing audiences.

The issue inevitably raises questions of a political and moral nature: political because of the enactment of power difference, moral because of the unquestioned, unreflexive imposition of the foreign visitors with their desires and interests on their African “hosts”, and the commodifying effects of this. There is a challenge to answer these political and moral problems raised in the ongoing exercise of cultural appropriation. In my anthropological interpretation rooted in a tradition emerging from Rousseau’s *Discours* I have followed elements from D. MacCannell’s (1976) pioneering and still highly cogent book on tourism, which had a salutary dose of cultural critique on core aspects of Western ideology. To pursue such a critique also constitutes one *raison d’être* of the anthropological discipline. While this paper is not specifically on the oft-lamented blights of tourism but primarily on the process of visualization and ideological “appropriation” of the Suri, the tourism and travel phenomenon is the general context in which these processes of labeling and cultural annexation are occurring, although recently augmented by a media discourse akin to confrontational reality TV (Eindhoven, Bakker & Persoon 2007).

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* An earlier version of this paper was presented on 25 September 2009 during a seminar at the Oxford University African Studies Centre. I am grateful to colleagues present on this occasion for their comments and critiques on the text.

In this paper I will contend that so-called “tribal Africa” is a prime example of the ongoing process of exoticist visualization and an aestheticizing of culture difference in ways that underline wealth and power differences, displayed with insistence, and perhaps arrogance. The process shows uninterrupted *continuity* with the colonial past. Far from the exoticist gaze being a bygone thing, a lingering of colonial hegemonism, etc.—a statement often made in the anthropological and historical literature—it is being recast and revived in an activist discourse of the global tourist and consumer industry, fed by its sheer mass and by projections of ethno-cultural diversity. In the words of Tornay (2008: 331), we see the revival of the “primitivist myth”.

This process of visual and cultural depiction of the exotic Other, although leading to increased face-to-face contacts and engagement between Westerners and “tribals”, does not lead to better inter-cultural understandings and other such noble aims. Mostly we see commodification (MacCannell 2001), subjection of the other, superficial, emotional exchanges, commercialization of subaltern ethnic groups (notably in Africa), a perpetuation of inequalities, and certainly a process of transformations of the cultural integrity of the groups depicted¹. The cultural others, perceived as remote from “us” in way of life and customs, yet close in their elementary preoccupations with love, sex, death, violence and the quest for excitement, are “appropriated” in a discourse that they themselves have not chosen and try to defend themselves against. This is a factual development which one can deplore or encourage, but it has a substantial impact, and more on the people on the receiving end (the “tribal groups”) rather than on the visitors.

The means by which this process of visualization and appropriation is effected are: sensationalism, purposeful culture shock and commercialization of the so-called “primitives” and their products and of the photographs taken among them (Tornay 2008). It is time to recognize that this is also an aspect of “development” and is even officially supported by numerous western and international (UN) agencies planning and scheming for development. The usually unquestioned assumption here is that tourism is good for development, as it raises GDP, diffuses technology, and enhances global flows of goods and people. That the social and cultural effects of photo and film-tourism are often questionable, in that power differences increase, that new local exploitative elites emerge, that local people’s behaviour inevitably changes for the worse (because they are forced to adopt an exploitative attitude toward visiting outsiders), that new western hegemonies are established (as many tourist enterprises are not locally owned), that humiliation and degrading interaction often take place, seems to be of no consequence

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1. People who still doubt the negative impact of tourism on local cultures, should read the *Bradt Travel Guide* update on the changing behaviour of rural Ethiopians, at: <www.bradt-travelguides.com/extrapage.asp?PageID=218>.

to the economic planners and promoters of development. There is only one model: produce marketable commodities, develop trade, monetize everything, invest in material growth, build facilities, and acquire money and wealth.

The Suri Rise to Stardom

The Suri people of Southwestern Ethiopia live in an area that is “remote” and can be reached only after a days-long car trek through difficult terrain. Their peripheral lowland habitat and their way of life as agro-pastoralists in an insecure environment, both natural (precarious rainfall, cattle disease) and human (surrounding enemy groups, raiding) are an attraction to certain visitors. The Suri cherish their independent way of life and are loath to take up agriculture and become a peasant population—which even would be difficult in their environment.

But the Suri are now a very famous group. They figure very prominently in the global neo-exoticist tourist and media discourse as a “primeval” and “relatively untouched tribe” of Africa. Since the mid-1990s dozens of documentaries, and hundreds of magazine articles, photo series and coffee-table books have been produced about them². Since I studied them as an anthropologist in the early 1990s, I have seen them emerge from a peripheral position, living in a lost corner of Ethiopia, and rise to stardom in the media landscape of the Western world (and some Asian countries, such as Japan). There are frequent screenings of documentaries on both public and commercial channels. The film that perhaps has given the major impetus to the process of what we indeed may call exoticist “harassment” (Tornay 2008) that now affects the Suri is the explorer-documentary “Suri” (2004), in the BBC series “Tribe”³. This very successful film shows a British lead character encountering the Suri (one of the “tribes” visited in the series) and getting explanations on their way of life and experiencing in person their “spectacular” culture. The film is a fairly honest and well-informed attempt to display the meaning of culture difference and of the challenges faced by people living in an insecure and relatively poor material environment, and it shows at least some real dialogue with the Suri people concerned. In a way, the film “worked”, due to its personal explorer format and its skilful appeal to a contemporary mass audience. But at the same time its effect has been paradoxical: it opened up another way of Western tourist-explorer engagement with these people, leading to new waves of visitors showing less subtlety and respect in dealing with the Suri. Since 2004, when the

2. And about neighbouring groups, like the Mursi (culturally similar to the Suri), the Kara, the Dassanetch, the Hamar, and to a lesser extent the Nyangatom, Tsamai, and Arbore.

3. <www.bbc.co.uk/tribe/tribes/suri/index.shtml>.

film was made, its formula was imitated many times, but often in a more simplifying, dramatized and sensationalist fashion. There have been innumerable film crews roaming in Suri country, so much so that complaints of Suri, getting tired of the over-exposure, can be heard.

Here I trace some aspects of the recent evolution of exoticist discourse on the Suri (and by implication on related peoples in the Ethiopian Southwest) during the last 15 years. When doing field research among the Suri I saw the first generation of explorer-tourists come to the Suri and published a paper on the encounter (Abbink 2000). Since then, this uneasy encounter between Suri and tourists, or foreign visitors in general, has undergone notable changes, both as to the numbers involved, the quality of the exchanges, and the attitudes of the Suri. Both parties have settled into a predictable but still controversial pattern of exchange, now mediated by predetermined sums of money for all social transactions and a good measure of irritation. The Suri have been able to deal with the constant tourist onslaught on their daily routines, habitat and way of life, but at some cost. They see tourists and film makers now as facts of life difficult to evade and are making the best use of them that they can, but have no particular affection for them.

Visualizing the Suri: Examples

There is a wide range of audio-visual and written media in which depictions of the Suri are found. I present them in their historical order of appearance (and do not mention anthropological publications, which started in 1993):

- photo magazine articles and coffee-table books;
- film documentaries;
- travel agency brochures;
- travellers' tales and tourist reports;
- website photo galleries;
- exhibiting, advertising and merchandizing products from, or based on, Suri culture.

In all these genres, the major Suri items and customs on which exoticist attention is focalized are the following:

- a. the female lip plate (and ear lobe discs);
- b. body painting;
- c. male ceremonial duelling (*sagine*);
- d. body scarification;
- e. diet, in particular the drinking of blood taken from a live cow;
- f. their "warrior" culture, indicated by the photos and shots of the ubiquitous automatic rifles and stern male faces.

In all films, travel reports, tourism brochures and magazine articles, before presenting these items above, the scene is always set with a sketch of the alleged original, tribal culture of the Suri, who are often said to live

in a “remote”, “forgotten”, “wild” and “dangerous” environment. Whatever the year of the publication or film is, the Suri are always a “recently discovered people, clinging to their old customs”. One sample from the *Aqua Geographia Magazine* (2001: 23) introducing an article by Heiko Bleher:

“The Surma people of Ethiopia are one of the tribes that still retain their millennia-old traditions, including the wearing of lip discs, a practice otherwise known only from South America. The AG team has survived a hair-raising adventure to bring you this sensational article”⁴.

Another text by musician David Bradnum (1993: 4-5), who reported to have discovered “the land that time forgot”. The Suri live:

“[...] in one of the remotest and most inaccessible places on earth [...]. One of the few true wildernesses left in Africa [...]. A world lost in time [...]. These Nilotic peoples have been locked in their fastness for centuries [...]. Life in these parts is short and brutish [...]. Out of the 60,000 Surma, only one man had ever left the area to work in an Ethiopian town [...]. All aspects of modern life had passed this people by [...]. Most had never seen a white person before.”

Predominant in a growing number of photo-series by Western photographers is a far-reaching aestheticization of the Suri. One example is the following citation, a text accompanying an exhibition in Paris in 2005 by Isabel Muñoz:

“Les peintures corporelles, les coiffures, les parures [of the Suri] inscrivent à même la peau de ces jeunes hommes, de ces enfants, de ces vieillards l’identité et la place de chacun, son appartenance à une communauté. Mais pour fonctionnelles qu’elles soient, ces inscriptions dénotent aussi une intention esthétique permanente. Isabel Muñoz explore ces corps, parfois les fragmente, s’attarde au grain de la peau. Si elle s’attache au sens des pratiques, à l’élégance des formes, elle n’y sacrifie jamais la sensualité, servie par des tirages au platine qui rend la chair palpable. Ces corps-architectures sont aussi des corps porteurs de désir. En ce sens, Isabel Muñoz bouleverse les limites traditionnelles entre le genre de la photographie ethnographique, et celui du nu apollinien ou de l’image érotique”⁵.

For researchers knowing a bit more about the great problems in Suri society, these views are somewhat unsettling in their very selective, aestheticized approach.

I now take closer look at the printed and audiovisual media in which the Suri are presented, and in which one or more of the six above-mentioned items and customs consistently appear.

4. <www.petsforum.com/aquageo/AquageoIssues/Aquageo23.html>.

5. Source: <<http://relationsmedia.photographie.com/?evtid=105851>>.

Photos in Magazine Articles and Coffee Table Books⁶

While the first published illustration of the typical Suri female—with lip plate—probably appeared in a Russian book of 1898 (Bulatovitch 2000) (see picture)⁷, the modern exoticist display seems to have started in the mid-1980s, with the lavishly illustrated books on the “remote”, “primeval” peoples of Africa by the French author A. Chenevière (1986, 1989), full of exoticist mythology and incorrect facts⁸, and the Italian Castiglioni brothers (1987), with a work that achieved “cult status”, called *Lo Specchio Scuro di Adamo*. While in the latter book—the result of a 10-year trek through Africa—there is a sincere interest in the African peoples, their survival skills and artistic traditions maintained in poor circumstances, the fascination with bodily culture and “traditional, tribal” life is predominant. The co-author, Giovanna Salvioni, was a trained ethnologist.

TIRMAGA SURI WOMAN

Picture taken in 1898 by A. K. Bulatovitch, a Russian officer in the army of Ethiopian emperor Menelik II (from his book *With the Armies of Menelik II*, Russian edition, 1900). This is the first published picture of the Suri lip plate.

Source: Courtesy of R. K. Seltzer©, on:

<www.samizdat.com/bulatovichphotos/illustrations/distorted%20mouth.jpg>.

6. All images reproduced in this paper are taken from open-access Internet sources, including commercial sites offering the items for sale, but permission was asked when appropriate.
7. The first Europeans who ever met the Suri and related peoples were the Italians under V. Bòttego in the late 1880s.
8. This author was very efficiently criticized by Serge TORNAY (2008).

A watershed, however, was the very successful book called *African Ark*, by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher (1990), with texts by G. Hancock. It was marketed intensively, constantly being on sale in all the tourist hang-outs in Ethiopia and beyond. This well-illustrated book has more or less defined the genre of Ethiopian or Horn of Africa tribal/ethnic photography⁹. It led to a great surge of interest in Ethiopian ethnic peoples and to the start of a new wave of tourism to the country, notably after 1992¹⁰. Several other books on Africa followed, equally well-produced, *e.g.*, on African ceremonies (1999), with a section on the Suri people. While the approach is not professionally anthropological, the artistic and visual information content of these works is valuable, and whatever the omissions in textual explanation and contextual understanding of the cultures and rituals depicted, the evocative force and value of the photographic documentation is great. The written text of the book, however, is full of mystification and inaccuracy (Tornay 2008: 331-332).

As to the lip plate, no one will deny it is peculiar if not sensational for most outsiders, and no other African group practices this custom any more, except the closely related Mursi people (Turton 2004). A typical photograph illustrates any piece of writing or filming on the Suri and Mursi, and is a must for any tourist brochure. An example is the one below:

SURI MARRIED WOMAN

Source: Courtesy of <www.lars.dj/ethiopia/06.html>.

9. Carol Beckwith already had success with her earlier books on two other archetypical African “tribes”, the Maasai of Kenya-Tanzania (1980) with Tepilit Ole Saitoti) and the WoDaabe of West Africa (1983).
10. Incidentally, local informants told me that the photo expedition of Beckwith and Fischer is said to have started the excessive demands for money for photo-shots amongst the Suri.

Another core image of Suri culture is the young painted Suri male, who “stick fights” and who goes on raiding expeditions—the “warrior”. The work of Beckwith & Fisher (1990, 1999) has done wonders to promote this type of image. Preferably, a handsome and “tough” male should be shown, or painted Suri girls, with, but also without, a lip plate. Here are examples:

SURI YOUNG MAN

Source: Courtesy of
<www.africanceremonies.com/ceremonies/largephotopages/10surmaman.html>
(Also found in: Beckwith & Fisher 1999).

SURI GIRL

Source: Courtesy of
<www.africanceremonies.com/ceremonies/largephotopages/13surmagirl.html>.

These were pictures of the first generation of photographers on the Suri, active in the 1980s and in the 1990s. Children were a favourite subject in those earlier pictures, and still are, but now in new, unexpected poses.

Below are a few samples of this, by the photographer Hans Silvester, who is only the latest in a whole tribe of western photographers visiting the Suri in recent years and displaying their work in countless web sites, magazines and exhibitions. One might call this group of photographers (*e.g.*, Silvester 2006, 2008; McCullin 2005; Zvardon 2006) the second generation, experimenting with more daring pictures, evoking sensation and puzzlement. It is the work of this generation that induced Tornay (2008) to speak of “photographic harassment”.

SURI BOYS

Source: Courtesy of the websites <www.toiquiviensdethiopie.com/?p=448>
and <http://ethiopie.canalblog.com/albums/les_peuples_d_ethiopie_vus_par_hans_silvester/index.html>.

The two above pictures are charming, but the boys no doubt have put on the plant material at the request of the photographer, perhaps to accentuate the Suri as “living close to nature”. They never wear this traditionally in any context.

Now another example:

SURI BOYS

© H. Silvester, *Les Peuples de l'Omo*, Paris 2006, Courtesy of Éditions de la Martinière.

Here we see another constructed situation, very likely posed at the request of the photographer. One can doubt if such a position or such a “game” was known among Suri boys. What did the photographer intend to evoke to Western audiences? Perhaps the “naturalness” and “innocence” of the Suri, but it is difficult to deny that this picture is degrading. For people knowing the Suri the picture is ambiguous, not to say shocking. It is even imaginable that when it would have been taken and shown in the West (with Western children) the photographer might run into trouble with the law. The body painting seen here is uncommonly artificial, and was most probably also applied at the request of the photographer. It is another indication of the fact that, while Suri body painting in the past was done only on certain occasions, the current demand has generated instant painting-on-demand, in exchange for sums of money by the visitors. Many more of such artificial pictures, although in themselves also artistic and giving the Suri room to experiment with their art, are found in the work of H. Silvester and other contemporary photographers¹¹.

11. An Ethiopian informant told me in August 2009 that H. Silvester was then living in the Suri (Kibish) area to pursue his work.

Other developments have been going on since then. To illustrate this, here below is a well-known picture from a late 2006 issue of the German mass-circulation media magazine *HörZu*:

Advertising for the *HörZu* radio-tv magazine, November 2006 (Photographer unknown).

Text: “At some point one does not simply take anything—Make no compromises—not at the kiosk either.”

The picture was not taken in the Suri or Mursi country, and is most likely a photo montage (the lip plate photo-shopped in?). The face, the hairdo and the hands of the woman do not look like that of a Suri/Mursi woman. Also the earrings she wears are modern, and not known by Suri or Mursi women. Anthropologists working in the Ethiopian Southwest got quite irritated by this exploitative picture and protested with the publisher.

A last picture in this genre, also obviously posed, is on the cover of famous press photographer Don McCullin’s book (2005) on Africa:

BOOK COVER PHOTO OF MCCULLIN 2006

Source: Courtesy of website <www.amazon.co.uk/Don-McCullin-Africa/dp/0224075144>.

The item that the man is wearing is a cattle head/neck decoration for a Suri or Mursi man's favorite cow or ox, made of braided leather, iron rings and warthog's teeth. It is never worn like this by people. It looks spectacular and bizarre, so it is a better picture with a man wearing it rather than a cow. But it is a decontextualized image meant to create exoticist puzzlement and has nothing to do with reality. The dark and ominous face of the man in black-and-white is probably also intended.

Concluding: in all these pictures, we see Suri people, but we can't be sure of what we see. Most of the photos are poses that create a new, mystifying reality. They are not meant to be enlightening or to explain. They reflect the preoccupations of the makers and have little to do with Suri life.

Film Documentaries

Here the most spectacular developments have taken place in the last decade, although in the late 1970s and 1980s British Granada Television pioneered with three films on the Mursi, advised by anthropologist David Turton (in the successful *Disappearing World* series). One of the very first documentaries featuring the Suri, the excellent *Voyage au Bout de la Piste: une autre Éthiopie*, was made in 1986 by French filmmaker J.-F. Luyat. These films were professional, made use of anthropologist insights, and gave viewers a good contextual picture of the people. Film material was also recorded in 1988 by the Beckwith and Fisher team¹². After 2000, documentary recordings followed in quick succession, some of them made into marketable films. In Ethiopia, a TV documentary was made and screened in 2001 by a team of Ethiopian state television (ETV)¹³. This was a serious documentary without any spectacular, sensationalist presentation, but it did not carry much background information.

Among large sections of the western viewer audiences, the Suri are now quite well-known, with commercial TV stations frequently showing (and repeating) items on them. The better quality documentaries appeared on Discovery, BBC 2, and various national public or state broadcasting networks (inspired by the Granada TV's *Disappearing World*, but with a more modern "entertainment"-oriented slant). Most important and popular was the episode "Suri", in the BBC (Wales) series "Tribe", already mentioned, where a British reporter-explorer (Bruce Parry) engaged with the Suri way of life in a kind of dialogic fashion and took both the Suri and his own role seriously.

But in recent years commercial TV stations such as the Dutch SBS-6, and the German VOX and ProSieben, have screened their own versions of

12. They also had a sound recording musician with them to record Suri music (David Bradnum), and a CD was later released. See also <<http://www.africanceremonies.com/projects.html>> on their projects.

13. Led by ETV journalist Hirut Mengisté.

this genre of documentary films. They took the so-called encounter formula used by the BBC Tribe series to its extreme, with the deliberate intent to shock both the European viewing audiences and the Suri.

In the SBS-6 programme, a Dutch average family, without any background information, was first sent to the Suri, to live there for three weeks. The confrontational, “realist” style of filming was followed. All their reactions—shock, dismay, irritation, disbelief, etc. were recorded and then later shown on TV; Suri responses to the white foreigners also. Big sums of money were paid to the hosts, in line with the TV station’s apparent idea that money will get you anywhere: past the authorities in Ethiopia, past any objections of the Suri, etc. This series (also recorded among other ethnic groups) was screened in 2005 and repeated in 2006. The next year another experiment followed: bringing some Suri (three men, two women) to the Netherlands and shock and unsettle them with Dutch culture—including visits to notorious red-light districts, raw fish eating (herring) on the street, visits to big amusement parks, etc. The reactions of misunderstanding, unbelief, puzzlement, and shock of the Suri visitors were also considered prime time TV material. In one of the scenes one Suri woman, after a few weeks in the Netherlands, remarked: “Well, you people seem to have everything. But I think no one is really happy here.” Probably an accurate observation.

Of course, no country experts or anthropologists were asked to give advice on this SBS-6 (and similar) TV series, because background knowledge on the people depicted would only stand in the way of the formula of confrontation, culture shock and sensationalism. The programme did not seek knowledge or understanding or edifying discourse, but confrontational entertainment, and perhaps evoking flashes of recognition among ordinary people in both societies. While the interest of average TV mass audiences for the exotic and the culturally different may have been awakened, a host of problems evoked in this formula were not dealt with¹⁴.

The screening of the SBS-6 programmes led to a wave of Dutch tourists wanting to go to the Suri (and to the other groups filmed)—a clear case of mimetic media contagion. Interestingly, within the Ethiopian immigrant community in the Netherlands the response to these films was deep embarrassment: it was said that “these people [the Suri, Mursi and others depicted] were not Ethiopians”¹⁵. *E.g.*, when Ethiopian children came home after being asked by school class mates about the “strange customs of you, Ethiopians”, the parents denied that the people in the film were Ethiopians. The

14. A similar formula was followed in a 2-part “documentary” made by the German film maker Richard Gress for the German commercial TV station VOX in 2006. See: “Reise zu den letzten Gladiatoren—Richard Gress bei den Surma in Äthiopien”. Info and sales talk at: <http://shop.vox.de/vox-shop/index.jsp?gruppe_id=359>.

15. Interview with an Ethiopian-Dutch informant, Leiden, 5 March 2007.

problem with these programs is that they do not allow for an informed discussion of culture difference and understanding of the origin and use of certain “customs”, because sensationalism and shocking the viewer audience is the prime purpose. This phenomenon of the reactionary cultural influence of the mass media is a challenge to the anthropological discipline, which sees its efforts to explain and enlighten undermined.

Another recent product in the genre of “documentaries” is a film by the French company Zed films (2007), which features the Suri as the *Black Samurai*. It was unavoidable that this kind of title would turn up one day (In another film, they were labelled as “gladiators”)¹⁶: The film casts the Suri in a heroic role as lone fighters—well-trained, tough and daunting, defending their homeland and cattle against the odds. It emphasizes the theme of their “intrepid warrior culture”, and zooms in on ceremonial stick duelling and the violence with neighbouring groups. This is how the film is presented by the makers:

“We are thrust into the lives of the Surma people, one of the fiercest tribes of South-western Ethiopia, where war ravages the land. Recently, because of a terrible famine, the Surma land has been infiltrated by hundreds of their lifelong enemies, the Bumis. They are aggressively seeking new territory, leaving the Surma no choice but to physically defend their land. In this film, we follow Wole Kiwo and his group of Surma warriors, as they watch over the confines of their territory to prevent attacks from the Bumis. War is about to break out, and the Surma King decides to call for a Donga. The Donga is a dual with long sticks during which blood must be shed. It helps to unify the clan and supply a contingent of new fighters for the upcoming battles. Wole Kiwo will go through the violent trial. He is ready to endure wounds that will brand his flesh with the mark of courage and forcefulness. He then will exchange his stick for a kalachnikov, and go back in the combat zone to fight back the Bumis”¹⁷.

While this text is overblown, inaccurate and not enlightening, the filmic story of *Black Samurai* is well told and done quite professionally, with many bird’s eye shots from hot air balloons and mountain tops, creating a dramatic effect that compels the viewers’ attention and aims to create admiration for the Suri people. This picture is, however, achieved at the price of several historical inaccuracies, and of the ignoring of internal tensions and disagreements among the Suri, the difficult role of women, the suffering resulting from violent deaths, and of recurring problems like food scarcity and government interference.

The publicity poster for the film, reproduced below, with the picture of a Suri “warrior”, had as its sub-title: “Every boy becomes a man, few men become warriors.”

16. Voir note 12.

17. <www.zed.fr/en/catalogue_detail.php?id_movie=3>.

SURI MAN, FROM THE FILM POSTER

© *Black Samurai* (dir. J.-P. Queyrat).

Source: Courtesy of <www.zed.fr/en/catalogue_detail.php?id_movie=3>.

Finally, one of the most recent films on the Suri, produced by the BBC, thus perverting the sound idea of their own series “Tribe”, was an episode on “stick fighting” among the Suri in the series *The last man standing*. This was a series where male Western athletes were shown to participate in “tribal sports” across the world. The Suri episode shows the Westerners entering the Suri duelling arena and participating in the duelling, which is announced as “[...] the world’s most brutal form of stick fighting. It’s insanely dangerous; no outsiders have ever before taken part”. Of course this kind of programme, another step in contemporary sensationalist TV-making and appropriation of the “tribal other”, was bound to happen¹⁸.

The paradox in this wave of film documentaries on Suri is that while the BBC “Tribe” film (see above) may have been a genuine effort at presenting the dilemmas of Suri life in a modernizing world, trying to present them in a respectful fashion, it inevitably has opened the door for ruthless commercialization by epigones with less serious intentions. As so often, a well-intended effort has created monsters. This is familiar in the tourist syndrome: discover exotic, remote, quiet places which you would like to keep secret but can’t, because you have to show your peers and relatives how great it was. Thus, the place ‘unspoilt by mass tourism’ (a favourite clause in travel agency brochures) is exposed, much visited and then on its way out. It is revealing to watch the VOX and SBS-6 programmes to see what I mean. The Suri of course have resilience and are able to maintain their group identity *vis-à-vis* others (which is what they wish), but still will

18. <www.bbc.co.uk/lastmanstanding/locations/ethiopia.shtml> for information and selected video shots from this programme.

lose much of the freedom and authenticity of their way of life¹⁹, and be integrated in a commercial, commoditized global mainstream where everything can be bought and culture is up for grabs and absorbed in consumerist discourse.

Exhibiting, Advertising and Merchandizing

The Suri are taken as inspiration for a growing number of products, capitalizing on their “weird customs”, notably of course the female lip plate and their body culture. I present a brief selection.

In the 1980s a US artist (Otti Mitchell) produced an ashtray in the form of, probably, a female Suri head, including the lip plates as the ash container (although the Suri wear one plate, in the lower lip). It was offered on an E-Bay website selling Ethiopian art and ethnic products:

ASHTRAY

Source: <<http://stores.ebay.nl/ethiopiagijis>> (©) (accessed 10 May 2007).

In 2001, a Dutch clothing company featured a Suri man with earlobe discs, facial painting, and Suri hairdo, in a fashion advertising campaign for shirts. Posters appeared on billboards in many city streets.

19. I will not elaborate here on what I mean by this, but suffice it to say that the Suri until recent years did not know prostitution, rape and child abuse.

Following their 1990 book, Beckwith and Fisher (1993) produced a booklet with postcards, including pictures with Suri women. This formula was followed in Ethiopia with several new series of postcards on the Suri, produced by Ethiopian photographers. Young Suri women were even brought to Addis Ababa studios to be portrayed. The following card is a good example:

SURI GIRL POSTCARD (2004)

Source: "HTRT Gifted Land Ethiopia" (©), distributor.

In this Ethiopian-made series, however, the girls selected did *not* wear the typical Suri female lip plate. They are aestheticizing displays of Suri people, very much posed. The cards are for sale in the big tourist hotels (Hilton, Sheraton, Ghion, etc.) as well as in souvenir shops and stationeries across Addis Ababa, and sell very well. This is an indication of the fact that Suri are now being marketed by Ethiopian entrepreneurs as well.

On a growing number of commercial websites, Suri (and related Mursi) material culture items are regularly offered for sale, *e.g.*, lip plates²⁰, wooden milk containers, decorated calabashes, and beads. A Dutch website offers lip plates for sale with the following description:

20. <http://stores.ebay.nl/ethiopiagijjs_W0QQcolZ4QQdirZQ2d1QQfsubZ0QQftidZ2QQpZ2QQtZkm>.

“This clay lip plates comes to you from the Mursi tribe of Ethiopia. Located in the Southern part of Ethiopia, the women of the Mursi tribe wear these lip plugs, which area symbol of beauty. This practice of piercing and stretching the lower lip, generally begins at puberty. When it comes time to marry, the price is higher for women with larger lip plates [...]. We guarantee that this item has been tribally used²¹”.

The information about the direct relation between the size of the lip plate and the amount of bride wealth transferred is inaccurate, but is becoming a new ethno-myth, which now even influences Suri discourse about the plate. The original metaphoric linkage is undermined. But marriage is not a selling transaction, and secondly, the bride wealth amount (“price”) is often agreed upon between families already before the maximum-size plate is inserted by a woman. The idea of this direct relationship, however, is now so much settled in exoticist-tourist discourse that it can no longer be dislodged. Correct information by ethnologists about this is not appreciated either.

Suri skin piercing and scarification have made into the tattoo and piercing world in the West. One example is the New Tribe Gallery in Toronto, Canada, which in 2007 hosted a special exhibition called, “Scar”, on Suri body modification. The accompanying publicity picture (made by photographer Marc Davidson) was like this:

SURI MALE SCARIFICATION

Source: <<http://inspirationalstyles.blogspot.com>>
(posting of 27 April 2007) (Marc Davidson)©.

Suri have thus become a trade mark (except that the dues were not properly paid) and figure as one of the icons in the postmodern era in which the “traditional” or the “tribal” have become a quintessential mark of originality and identity, even if in a playful and coquettish manner. An erotic element is always present, suggested by that fact that both the people depicted are predominantly nude and exude innocent sensuality, and by the

21. Source: <<http://stores.ebay.nl/ethiopiagifs>>, 10 May 2007.

suggestive poses often taken by the subjects (for money) in positions that suggest a proud sexuality and physical self-confidence. This latter element is indeed a characteristic of the Suri, but a problem arises when this image is systematically projected to the outside world. Here there is no difference at all with the colonialist discourse on subjected tribal peoples, as analyzed, for example, in the book by Corbey (1989).

Travel Agencies' Texts

Here we find exoticist-tourist prose at its best. In glowing terms that usually have little to do with local realities, we are assured that we will find a "pristine tribe, living with their own customs 'since time immemorial', a fierce and proud people", etc.

Here is an example of a private Ethiopian tour operator's description of the "Surma" in their Southern tour²²:

The Surma, who are agro-paternalists, primarily live on milk and blood, and plant sorghum, maize and millet to subsidize their diet. They live in a dome shaped huts. Lip plate²³ and donga stick fight²⁴ are the two typical distinctive features of these people which they share with the neighboring Mursi people. In fact, the Surma, who are from the Nilo-Sahara linguistic group, are the largest from the Surmic family which includes the Mursi, the Chai, the Tirma, and the Bale.

Like their neighbors, the Surma also paint their bodies. They create a variety of designs on their necked bodies using their finger tips which help them to expose their dark skin. The painting could have both a beautifying and opponent frightening purpose. As one studies these body paintings whirls, stripes, flowers and stars designs are noticeable. The girls also get painted by Surma men who are generally believed to be expert artists. The deadly iron wrist knife, which is used in cattle raids and during fightings against their sworn enemies, is a vital weapon for the Surma.

Except to say that they are not "agro-paternalists", that the Chai and Tirma together *are* the Suri (also known as "Surma"), that the stick fight is not called "donga", that the wrist knife is not a vital weapon at all (it is very rare and hardly used), that body painting has no real "frightening purpose", and that milk and blood are not their main daily "staple", the text gives a fair picture of the Suri.

Some tour operators also started offering arranged stick fighting contests. The tourist agency "Amazing Ethiopia" states, in a description of one of its itineraries:

22. <www.13suns.com/surma.htm>.

23. <<http://www.13suns.com/liplates.htm>>.

24. <<http://www.13suns.com/stickfight.htm>>.

“KIBISH DAY-15. Have a full day visit to the near by villages of the Surma people. It is possible to arrange Donga, a traditional stick fighting ceremony up on a common agreement with you”²⁵.

This is pure commercialization. The real “stick fights” (properly called: ceremonial duelling contests; in Suri: *sagine*) of course cannot be arranged on request, as they are massive contests tied to certain moments and activities in the cycle of Suri life. What the tourists will see, therefore, is small-scale, staged duelling between a few people in exchange for big money.

Travellers’ Tales and Tourist Reporting

There is a wide variety here, with quality reporting in a balanced tone, but also a lot of boasting and exaggeration. Remarkable is the often smug tone of self-satisfied reporting by explorer-tourist travellers and free-roaming journalists about their feats in Africa—with the familiar themes of “how difficult the roads were, how poor they are, but also nice and hospitable, how difficult it was to sleep, what dangers were faced (Egremont-Lee 1996), but still, how well contact was made with the locals”, etc. One example emphasizing the hardships in the field is this account, from a 2002 report:

“Leaving mud, the terrain changed thankfully to sand and taking the wrong track we entered the lands of our first tribe—the Surma. We were later to find out they are an aggressive warrior tribe, constantly at battle with their neighbouring tribes—but to us as we took a step back in time it was a view of Africa ‘past’. Naked people decorated with beads and animal skins, the women with lip plates the size of small dinner dishes, men with scars all over their bodies proudly showing how many enemies they have killed. It was a severe culture shock. The only 21st century clue were the machine guns everyone seemed to be carrying around. Savages with guns—a very dangerous mix!!”²⁶.

This is preposterous reporting, but it is not uncommon to read this kind of prose, which we may put down to the consumerist pleasures sought in the adventurous exploration of unknown lands.

Travellers and tourists now also increasingly post short video films on the Suri (or “Surma”) on YouTube. In these films, usually no more than fragments, the familiar themes of lip plates, cattle-blood drinking, stick duelling and body painting predominate.

25. <www.amazingethiopia.com/surmaitinerary.htm>.

26. Source: <www.hope-for-children.org/PROJECTS/2002/AFRICA_UPDATE_ETHIOPIA.html>.

Website Photo Galleries

Website photo galleries on the Suri made by tourists, travellers and photographers run into the dozens and will not be discussed here. Suffice it to say that most galleries reveal the above-mentioned emphasis on strongly aesthetic portrayal of the Suri and on their artistry as body painters²⁷.

Elements of Suri Identity as Presented in Exoticist Discourse

A growing part of Western audiences is fascinated by the cultural Other. It is a movement of reinventing or recycling exoticism, and engaging in visualized, exotopic self-fashioning in a context of increasing globalization. Globalization itself—by radically reducing the time and space limitations on social and cultural contacts, thus accelerating the general diffusion of images, goods and money—has created the illusion of accessibility and availability of the Other. But it underestimates the treacherous superficiality of those contacts and also the accumulated meanings that come into play and still complicate interaction. The relevance of these meanings and of the values of the “Others” is even denied in a facile discourse of the “equality” of all humans displayed in many of the exoticist products discussed here.

In any visualization of the Suri by foreigners, familiar *topoi* have now been established and regularly return:

First, the heroic, tough sportsmen—in the so-called “stick fights” (ceremonial duelling). A typical presentation of the duelling goes like this:

“After the harvest, Surma men assemble for a series of wild and violent stick fights called the donga. A test of nerves and brute strength, the donga is fought to prove masculinity, settle personal vendettas, and most importantly, to win wives. [...] In preparation for the annual donga stick fights, Surma men paint themselves from head to toe. They smear their bodies with a mixture of chalk and water and then draw designs with their fingertips, exposing the dark skin beneath in an intricate pattern of fine lines. By doing this, they hope to make themselves not only more attractive to women, but also more fearsome to their opponents”²⁸.

This text is a dramatized mixture of truths and half-truths, which I will not go into here.

Second, *the fighters*—always at war with surrounding enemies. This is also partly true. But it has not always been like this, and it would be instructive to look for the material reasons for current enmities, and not present it as an immutable fact of nature.

27. A lot of Suri pictures can be found on the site: <www.flickr.com>.

28. Source: <<http://www.africanceremonies.com/largephotopages/12surmastick.html>>.

Third, the “beautiful people”—their artful body decorations, lip plates and scarifications.

This is of course a major attraction of the Suri, and figure in every written or audiovisual presentation, from the very moment of their “discovery” by the explorers V. Bòttego and A. Bulatovitch (late 19th century).

Fourth, their radical “alterity”—their amazing, “bizarre” way of life, their basic “primitive” character despite their being very interesting to look at: very poor living conditions, drinking blood, removing teeth of girls, massive body scarification, lip plate disfiguration, etc.

Fifth, an underlying theme is eroticism: of the stick duelling, of the virtually naked young men and women, of physical self-display, etc. Many film images and photos are geared to this aspect.

The exoticist discourse is full of paradoxes: we see latent admiration for the “freedom” and originality of the Suri, but also deep astonishment, ridicule and paternalist disdain about the “primitiveness” of the people. There may also be a fascination with the Suri (and Mursi) because of a perceived similarity with concerns in our own society: Suri are not modest and reserved, but boisterous, individualistic, often aggressive, do not shun alcohol use, and love physical display (bodies, guns, paintings).

The Suri as Exotic/Primitive Counterpoint of Postmodern Industrial Society

Looking at the various genres of visualization, it seems that the following presentation strategies recur:

- Dramatization: the Suri as “lone heroes” depending only on themselves.
- Idealization: a happy, original pristine, unadulterated “tribe” of noble savages (this is not a fictitious idea; many people in our mass consumer industrial societies believe in it)²⁹.
- Decontextualisation: the Suri as an independent solitary tribe surrounded by enemies, untouched by the state, and having lived like this since ages. Little, if any, information is given on their socio-political organization. This is a serious omission, but understandable in exoticism discourse because it disturbs the image and introduces “problems”. At the same time, this is the reason why all the photographic and film images of the people do not produce realism but illusion.
- Ritual declaration of solidarity: the similarity and oneness between “us and them” is proclaimed. The Suri themselves also cave into this. In the more serious documentaries made by people who had an ambition to know and understand (*e.g.*, the BBC Tribe episode, where we see the ritual leader,

29. Beckwith and Fisher’s work, who largely initiated this. Although they idealized and exaggerated, they also called for genuine interest and respect for the threatened, original cultures of Africa.

one of the key characters of the film, do this), they probably meant it, expressing sincere friendship, although as good sum of money had mediated this statement. Nowadays, this is less obvious, and the Suri use it to get money and other resources.

With regard to the Suri, the image of an exotic and exciting Other prevails. It is systematically and predictably reproduced. Seeing the nature and function of this imagery among Western, or in general affluent industrial society, audiences we can also understand why any informed anthropological information, let alone critique, is not welcome at all. On the dozens of website photo galleries, popular reports, magazine articles, etc., no mention is made of available literature on the Suri or in general on the Ethiopian ethnic groups presented³⁰. This would spoil the “authentic sense of discovery” that is carefully constructed by photographers, films makers and tourist agencies for their audiences. The need to sell the tours, the photos and the documentaries demands mystification, hiding and creating an image of the unknown, of a land and people that time forgot. In this way, the entertainment value is optimized.

In an interview some time ago on her book *African Ark*, co-author Angela Fisher said this about the Suri:

“Surma land is like an absolute paradise, says Angela Fisher, describing a remote area in southwest Ethiopia, green with pastures, valleys, and rain forests. The Surma are very peaceful, serene people who are in love with their own lifestyle. They believe that God has given them everything, and the cattle they own are probably the best cattle in the world”³¹.

She goes on:

“Once the bodies are painted and men and women have started courting one another, the other side of courtship starts. Once a week, the Surma men from different villages come together, sometimes walking thirty miles on very small grass paths to meet one another to perform the most wild sport we have ever seen on the entire African continent. The donga stick fight is fought with long, straight poles of about eight foot long made of very hard wood, and the Surma men perform these fights to prove their masculinity, to settle personal vendettas, but most importantly, to win wives”³².

It is nice to read about people valuing the Suri way of life and calling for respect, but apart from inaccurate in several details, this is perhaps carrying it too far, and undeniably is an echo of the “noble savage” image, a resilient *topos* in Western discourse. The second part of the citation reveals another contradiction often found in exoticist texts: while being presented as peaceful and happy, the people are also fierce and aggressive: in their “stick fighting”, and in their raiding and killing members of neighbouring groups.

30. An exception is the BBC Tribe website, where a few items are listed, see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/tribe/tribes/suri/index.shtml#further1>.

31. www.pulseplanet.com/archive/Sep00/2223.html.

32. www.pulseplanet.com/archive/Sep00/2224.html.

There is a wide demand for the books and other media displaying this image and this discourse on the Suri as an exotic/primitive counterpoint. The books are well produced, with often very good photography, and are sufficiently exciting, because sensationalist, to draw a wide audience. There will always be a market for such books and films, because people crave for the exotic, the bizarre, the different, the unpredictable and the deviant—to be entertained. It can never be emphasized enough that all these encounters with the cultural others, or with anything that is different from life in one's own—perhaps predictable and dull—society, is fuelled by (post)modern entertainment culture. This holds in particular for audio-visual products. We saw that in all the films and TV documentaries—with one or two exceptions—the aim is not to enlighten, but first and foremost to amuse, to entertain. In the work of some photographers, this work may even shade into racism.

Scenes from ordinary daily life do not really fit this picture. While better depicting average reality, they are not entertaining, and are mostly left out in exoticist representations. One may see the occasional wife with kids, a marriage or burial ceremony and children playing or dancing, but rarely house-building, agricultural work, cattle herding, public debates, or elders relaxing in conversation or games. But these unspectacular, peaceful scenes, such as the one below, are a more characteristic part of Suri life as duelling, body painting, fighting, or drinking cow's blood:

TWO ELDERS PLAYING THE BOARD GAME *HOR*, LATE ONE AFTERNOON, 1992

On the right is the then ritual Chai-Suri leader (*komoru*), the other is a respected elder of a leading Suri clan (on the left).

Source: J. Abbink (fieldwork 1992 ©).

Developmental Effects of Exoticist Images

There is a direct developmental relevance of exoticist discourse. First of all, the perceptions of wide sections of the audiences in the rich world (who are giving the “development aid”) is conditioned by it. It generates interest in other ways of life but also feelings of distance about the Suri and related groups as bizarre through amusing primitives. Among some explorer-tourists and writers, there is also over-identification and idealization, leading to protectionist feelings. This is, for instance, evident in the vehemently anti-missionary stance of many tourists, photographers and films makers³³. One example is the photo-gallery of Isabel Muñoz, which states:

“Their traditional values are threatened our days by the Presbyterian Church who tries to mission [*sic*] the people. This aggressive church is heavy supported by the Bush administration who is [*sic*] aim is to impose western values in order to control the last white spots in the Earth”³⁴.

In such comments, it is striking to see that the photographers and tourists deny any impact of their own presence while denouncing that of missionaries and other development workers. But something is amiss here. When one Ethiopian researcher in Southern Ethiopia showed Mursi people a photo book about them, they were shocked by the way the Mursi were depicted there³⁵. Suri people have the same ambivalence and shock or surprise about the pictures when they see them in books and magazines (they don’t see everything). Children and youngsters are less negative, as they receive good money for pictures that the *färänjis* (the foreigners) want and as far as they are concerned can get. However, educated, government-employed Suri who are spokesmen of the community are worried about the image that is created of their people.

A rethinking and cultural critique of “development” is needed, informed by background knowledge and processes of knowledge generation and negotiation that emerge in local conditions. But will it have any effect? Unlikely. Commercialization, consumerism and an obsession with technocratic-material development continue, on the basis of the core idea of one-size-fits-all. Policy

33. Despite the fact that the presence of these missionary or church-affiliated workers (now all locals) is no longer to aggressively win souls but to assist people in education, agriculture, livestock health and medicine, and, if they show interest, to gain their own way to the Christian faith. There is a religious interest of course, but it is not pursued in the “classic” missionary fashion (ABBINK 2004) and responds to Suri interest when evident.
34. Source: Text for her photo exhibition in a gallery in Braga, Portugal, in 2003, at: <www.artfacts.net/index.php/pageType/exhibitionInfo/exhibition/11775>. It was later moved to Paris (2005) and other places.
35. See M. Blonk, “De jacht op de Mursi” (= “The hunt for the Mursi”), in the online Dutch newsletter *Afrika-Nieuws*, 21 February 2007 (Online at: <www.africa-interactive.net/index.php?Pageid=3296>). See also S. LATOSKY (2007), citing Mursi views.

makers are often impervious to rational or pragmatic debate and critiques on development and its multiple dimensions, modes and alternatives. They do not really consider local adaptations to the situation of people on the ground, because these interfere with set schemes of interpretation, dominant paradigms of development and the bureaucratic logic of plans made and budgets determined. We see it in the case of the Omo and Mago parks: despite the reasonable criticism by social science experts and advocates on the proposed “development” trajectory and the possible role of the parks as income generators, government or management agencies show little inclination to pick this up. The Suri and Mursi in their view are simply to be the human decoration of these parks and should not disturb wildlife and tourism there. In the initial plans of the EU parks project (1994-1998), as well as in the African Parks Foundation project (2005-2008), very little attention was given to the role of local people in and near the parks³⁶. The Ethiopian government cooperates in this. It seems only to have a marginal interest in the local people. It is the promise of cash proceeds that is important for them (and there will also be proceeds from illegal poaching, or even from legal “sport hunting” by rich foreigners who for large payments get a permit to shoot big game). In the recent plans preceding the take-over of the Omo and Mago National Parks (containing Suri and Mursi populations), it is again evident how little concrete cooperation is sought with the local people and the Park management, with the (Dutch) African Parks Foundation. This is a well-meaning organization committed to the preservation of wildlife, but they stated it was not their responsibility to directly deal with the consequences of Park policy for humans living in or near the parks. The development of the national parks in southern Ethiopia was continued by the Ethiopian government under the UN Global Environmental Facility³⁷, which so far does not promise any meaningful improvement of this track record. It thus looks like the role of the local people is to be there to be photographed for the tourists but not to “disturb” the parks, nor to assist in their maintenance³⁸. This is a form of “development”,

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36. In the report by W. G. VAN DER HOVEN (1997), commissioned under the big EU project for National Parks development in Ethiopia (7 ACP ET 068), there was one non-committal paragraph of five lines on “Involving the local people” (p. 17). The problems were not solved under the new regime of the African Parks Foundation (a private foundation in The Netherlands hired by the Ethiopian government) that took over park management in Southern Ethiopia in 2006 (Omo, Mago, and Netchesar parks). It left again in 2008 after legal challenges and the government’s moves to evict people from the park areas.
  37. See, Project Document, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, United Nations Development Program, Global Environment Facility. *Full Project: Sustainable Development of the Protected Area System of Ethiopia (SDPASE)*, (no date; probably 2006).
  38. It is to be doubted if these problems are addressed in the new plans to develop the parks, prepared under the UN Global Environment Initiative, with the support of the Ethiopian Government.

but not to *their* long-term benefit. The situation is becoming more acute also in the context of growing global competition: rich Western countries are no longer the only one giving foreign aid to Africa but compete with emerging powers in the Middle East and Asia—with China as major player. These powers have quite different agendas.

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The Suri have become a prime target of international tourist/consumerist exoticist discourse. In the space of 15 years, they have moved from anonymity into media stardom. All the familiar trappings of the enterprise are there: valorization and marketing of their “culture”, media over-exposure, substantial infusion of cash (paid to them by the visitors), development of an instrumentalist attitude towards outsiders, ambivalent cultural pressures to both retain their “bizarre customs” for display as well as to give them up³⁹, selective commodification of their “culture”, and aestheticization and eroticization. Internally, there are growing internal disputes among the Suri about the proceeds, etc. The money gained in hosting the foreigners is usually spent on buying stock animals, weapons, ammunition, personal decorative items (*e.g.*, beads), and on increased alcohol consumption.

It can be argued that the Suri are now ideologically “recolonized” by tourism and mass media, fuelled by mass audiences’ cravings for sensationalism and exotic imagery. The Suri are so to speak the “pet primitives” of today: they are photogenic, intriguing for their “weird” customs (drinking blood, scarifications, lip plates, spectacular body paint, teeth removal), and sufficiently aggressive and “fierce” to fit the need for excitement that Western TV audiences desire, and if need be they are also accessible for a personal visit.

Reviewing the entire process of visual appropriation and representation of so-called primitive groups like the Suri, we might say that it is positive that the authentic visual culture, artistry and survival skills of the Suri get attention, perhaps even recognition⁴⁰. This is clear from the better-quality documentaries and written reports on the group. It is not all trash. There is an informative content to certain programmes and publications. But at the same time there is a moral problem of power difference, harassment, exploitation, and excessive commercialization that will not go away. It seems undeniable that the Suri culture and way of life are commodified

39. See the Ethiopian state declaring them harmful customs.

40. Foreign tourist observers or photographers wax lyrical when they start talking about the body painting of the Suri and related people in Southern Ethiopia: see, for instance, the comment by J.-P. MARI, “La peinture de soi: Le génie des peuples de l’Omo”, online at: <www.grands-reporters.com/IMG/_article_PDF/article_350.pdf>.

and made into a spectacle, and this process tends to deny them agency in styling themselves in ways that may not fit the images created by outsiders. The pictures by photographers like H. Silvester, I. Muñoz, and to a lesser extent D. McCullin (*e.g.*, posed in new situations, and with exuberant body painting that did not exist before), as well as the sensationalist documentaries and TV programmes of some commercial TV stations are the most worrying examples of this. Whatever the “inventive” responses that local peoples devise to this onslaught, serious ethical problems arise (Abbink 2000; Turton 2004), if only because of the fact that this exercise, above all else, privileges the way of life, the interests and the emotional preoccupations of the makers of these photos, films, and travel accounts. One could simply deny this fact, as Eindhoven, Bakker & Persoon (2007) do in their paper on anthropologists and the Dutch SBS-6 “Jungle” programmes—but that is avoiding the question, denying its relevance and taking a very relativist stance. These authors are apparently not anthropologists, and if so then they are unaware of the professional ethics code that field researchers and academics need to follow. Furthermore, while money has flowed to the Suri, many of their daily problems continue to exist and indeed will not be solved, or even properly discussed, due to their routine exposure to the gaze and physical presence of the foreign visitors⁴¹.

It is remarkable to see the *mimetic effect* of the photographic and representational appropriation of Suri by those outsider audiences. In modern-industrial, globalized society, dominated by the visual image instead of the written word or reflexive discourse, people want to imitate, to equal and to rival with others. As the famous cultural philosopher René Girard has convincingly claimed, this imitative rivalry drives human relations and generates tensions. If people see Bruce Parry on TV among the Suri, they say, “I want to do the same, I *can* do that also, why don’t I try it”. And many then book a flight to Ethiopia, take camping equipment, rent a 4-WD, and go off to the “jungle”. This whole exercise reflects the mental opportunity structures of our affluent world, where impulses and hedonistic consumer desires suggested or evoked in mass media and cyber space must be gratified, fueled by the domestic (home society) drama of leisure-time competition and prestige ranking of which people feel they must not be excluded.

Is the “exoticism” of today the same as that of colonial times? We know that the phenomenon of visual appropriation and mis-representation was a hallmark of the colonial encounter (Corbey 1989). The differences seem to be minimal. While the developing countries visited (where the

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41. The only more durable impact of the visits of tourists and film makers seems to have been that of the BBC team, who made an informative website and organized actions to supply several peoples filmed in the series (including Suri and Nyangatom) with various forms of assistance, see <www.bbc.co.uk/tribe/topics/issues.shtml>.

ethnic groups visited live) have independence and have often gone through processes of ethno-cultural revival, the structure of interaction between locals and visitors is not a reciprocal one. Power, prestige, money and agency (in wider arenas) are highly unequal—indeed, *must* be unequal—in order for the visualization and appropriation of the natives to have its appeal in the tourist market, dominated by relatively affluent visitors. Interactions are fraught with tension and ambivalence. The people photographed, filmed and stared at often feel slighted or taken advantage of (Abbink 2000: 10–11). This is also evident from the revealing Mursi dialogue cited by Turton (2004: 7) in his paper.

As suggested above, the representational conventions that are still defining this interaction of “us and them” have relevance for development policies⁴². These conventions reveal a persistent Western, or a more general, rich or developed industrial society⁴³ obsession with commercializing and appropriating non-Westerners and “their cultures” for one’s own purposes, perhaps on the basis of tacit superiority feelings based on their own perceived achievements of techno-economic development and of modernity. The self-image is ‘we *are* developed, aren’t we, and we should be a “model” for the rest of the world, as every G-8 summit and every development policy document of the modern-industrialized countries, World Bank, etc. is never tired of repeating. More wealth, more GDP, more infrastructure, more commerce, etc. are the aim. What happens to cultural values and the social fabric in the process is not an issue, or is wholly secondary. However, as the growing tide of cultural discontent and resistance in developing countries makes clear, we ignore the effects of such commercialized and often arrogant appropriations of “the Other” at our peril. It may be time to redress the balance, to discredit and dismantle exoticism, and to allow people—however poor and culturally divergent they may be—to follow their own ways to “development”, including their own presentation of self.

Centre d’Études africaines, Leiden.

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42. While the Suri make money from their “primitiveness” and are not charmed by tourists’ behaviour and by plans to turn them into sedentary cultivators or make them give up their customs, the Ethiopian government, NGOs and donor country assistance programs subsume them under a model of underdevelopment, poverty and “backward culture” to be “reformed” as soon as possible. Interestingly, my experience is that this modernizing narrative is much less present among contemporary Christian missionary workers, who seem to have more respect for Suri culture and worldview and allow for a gradual, adaptive transformation and a retention of part of the elements of the traditional culture.
  43. The same attitude is seen among affluent Chinese, Japanese, Arab and other tourists.

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ABSTRACT

The Suri people in Southwest Ethiopia have become the continued target of affluent tourist visitors, TV documentary producers, journalists and various other travelers. In this "encounter", one theme dominates: the "discovery of a remote, pristine tribe" with a "natural, unspoilt physical beauty". The Suri are engaged by the western visitors with a specific image of the exotic and are expected to conform to it; they are thus made into a cultural spectacle. In most of the encounters, the agency of the Suri as a people with their own problems and interests is negated and the effect of foreign presence on them is denied or ignored. A process of exoticization and accompanying commodification is at play, showing a seamless continuity with the colonial gaze.

RÉSUMÉ

Images des Suri : le retour de l'exotisme et la marchandisation d'une « tribu » éthiopienne. — Le peuple suri du Sud-ouest de l'Éthiopie est devenu la cible continue de touristes riches, de journalistes, producteurs de documentaires de télévision, et de divers autres voyageurs. Dans cette « rencontre », un grand thème semble dominer : celui de la « découverte d'une tribu isolée et primitive, d'une beauté naturelle préservée ». Les Suri sont approchés par ces visiteurs occidentaux à partir d'une image spécifique de l'exotisme et s'y conforment ; ils sont ainsi transformés en spectacle culturel. Pendant la plupart de ces rencontres, la réactivité des Suri, comme peuple ayant ses propres problèmes et ses intérêts, est niée, et l'impact de la présence étrangère ignoré. Un processus d'exotisation et de marchandisation est ainsi pleinement visible, démontrant une continuité remarquable et ininterrompue avec le regard colonial.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: Ethiopia, Suri people, exoticism, exploitation, tourism, visual representations/*Éthiopie, Suri, exotisme, exploitation, tourisme, représentations visuelles.*