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# Tourism and Its Discontents: Tourist Encounters in Ethiopia

Jon G. Abbink

## Tourism as an "Avant-garde" of Globalization

The tourism "industry" is the largest business in the world, and has, apart from its economic significance, a growing social and cultural impact on the local societies and places visited. The transformative role of tourist activity in society and culture deserves closer attention. In its present form, tourism is the expression of a particular kind of consumer identity with a notable globalizing impact. It emanates largely from societies that are relatively powerful and wealthy. Communities and places visited by tourists undergo unforeseen changes due to these foreign visitors' unrelenting presence. While both positive and negative aspects can be recognized, in most cases a process of skewed or unequal exchanges between tourists and locals is evident, though these need more extensive empirical study in emerging contexts of globalization (which is here defined as a transformative process of intensified contacts via mass and electronic media and migration—between human collectivities and communities in the economic, political, and cultural domains, forging new and more pervasive interrelations and dependency between social and cultural units of varying scale).

This article is a reflection on the encounter of foreign tourists with the town of Surnat, people of southern Ethiopia, a relatively small ethnic group

only recently "discovered" by the tourist industry. Next to describing the encroachment of tourism among these people, I intend to give a cultural critique of tourism, developed on the basis of Suri views. Seeing tourists at work was a phenomenon that initially rather disturbed me while doing field research.<sup>2</sup> The first question, of course, might be why an ethnographer should at all feel disturbed. Some critics will jump in to say: "Because there are 'hidden similarities' between tourists and anthropologists, as affluent Westerners or uninvited guests, among a culturally different group—similarities that generate some kind of guilt and insecurity about the epistemological basis of the latter's research activities." We can respond to such a remark with a qualified yes: there is, on one level, indeed a similarity in that the tourist visit and the ethnographic praxis are both strategies for "framing the exotic" (Harkin 1995:667). But on this trivial level anthropologists can also be said to share characteristics with pilgrims, businessmen, or missionaries, or anybody entering for him/her a new social setting—a not uncommon experience for people also in their own society. Furthermore, this argument leaves us little wiser about *what is actually happening* in such "intercultural encounters," about their different shapes, or about their historicity.<sup>3</sup> An anthropological understanding of tourist-"native" interactions needs to aim at explaining the preconditions, the structure and meaning of the tourist encounter, with reference to the interests and cultural models that are articulated in that setting.

In many respects, tourism imposes itself as a dominant global "exotopic strategy" (Harkin 1995) to deal with cultural difference. Due to its ubiquitous presence in the media, in advertising, and in international business, the discourse of travel and tourism tends to exclude or push away other viewpoints. It can be said to be a hegemonic system of representation that may function as part of an (unconscious) *ideology* of globalization. As such, tourism deserves much more empirical and theoretical exploration, as Nash (1996:179) has suggested in a recent overview. However, in contrast with previous tourism studies "... the voice of the other [i.e., those visited by the tourists] needs to be given its due" (196). In this article, responses of the Suri people toward tourists will be developed.

The Suri, an agropastoralist group of about 28,000 people in the utmost southwest of Ethiopia, are an interesting case because of the fact that not their geographical area or natural setting (rivers, forests, mountains, game parks, etc.) but *they themselves* are the prime attraction for the tourists:<sup>4</sup> as a "real primitive, untouched tribe." This is how they are advertised. The Suri are indeed a marginal group in Ethiopia, and, although faced with manifold problems, retain a high degree of socio-cultural integrity. But any idea of their being untouched or isolated is incorrect. They have been involved in wide-ranging regional trade-flows of cattle, gold, arms, ivory, and game products at least since the late nineteenth century and have, for the past two decades, been affected by the Sudanese civil war and by Ethiopian state efforts to incorporate them politically, economically, and socially. The production of

their reputation of "primitiveness" and "remoteness" is in the first instance a phenomenon or problem to be explained from the perspective of the tourists, since they are the consumers of images of "authentic experience" and of "exoticism" that are carefully screened and constructed. These images function as commodities like any other and a growing part of the tourist industry is thriving on them. In exploring some aspects of the tourist encounter, this article will contend that especially when people instead of nature or buildings are the object of such commoditized images, tourism often leads to friction or conflict.

## The Semiotics of Tourism

Theorizing on tourism has been done within a variety of frameworks, among them, neo-Marxism (MacCannell, 1976, 1984), semiotics (Culler 1981; Harkin 1995; Urry 1990), and cultural psychology. It is less interesting to present a list of possible motives of tourist behavior, such as nostalgia, quest for the unknown, breaking the daily routine, rediscovery of the self, etc.,<sup>5</sup> than to inquire into some of its formal, systematic aspects. Recognizing that there are several different types of tourists or "modes" of tourist experience (cf. Cohen 1979:183), it might be possible to identify some of these formal aspects. In this respect we follow some leads of Michael Harkin's very interesting semiotic approach (Harkin 1995).

In a semiotic perspective one can say that tourist experiences, especially of tourists of the type discussed in this paper, are initially marked by an anxiety about authenticity" (653). Tourists expect a kind of credibility and genuineness about the objects, places, and people they visit. Tourists expect the latter to be contained in a system . . . "whereby a set of signs marks the object as authentic," so that their attention can be focused (653). The tourists can thus be given an orientation vis-à-vis their own framework of familiarity related to their own society. In other words, the alterity of the family landscape or the other people should be appropriated (655). This implies a hegemonic strategy, domesticating the exotic (656). This semiotic enterprise, of course heavily supported by photography (see below), is evidence of the search of tourists for predictability in a context of new meanings. Culture difference as such is not problematic in such a scheme, but it should be marked clearly. The tourists expect such a minimal semiotic frame wherever they go.

## Identity and Difference in the Contested Field of Global Encounters

In the encounter of Suri and tourists, extremes meet. Suri have always been at the margins of the Ethiopian state, even though they nominally have belonged to it since 1898. They were wary of outsiders—Ethiopian soldiers, traders and administrators, Italian colonizers, and visiting white tourists. A

politically and economically largely self-sufficient society, they always tried to assert their way of life and group identity toward others. Questions of identity and difference have thus been a vital issue in all their relations with non-Suri.

In the past decade, the Suri have been visited not by mass tourism but by a "select" crowd of tourists who have seen all the regular mass-tourist destinations and who like to think of themselves as "adventurers and explorers." In the 1980s, a few travel agencies in Italy, the United States, and Germany (and several expatriate Italian and American travel agents with an office in Addis Ababa) started advertising the Suri as a destination for this category of "explorer"-tourists. This attracted small groups of Western and later also Japanese and other tourists for an adventurous or exotic vacation "off the beaten track." In the case of the Italians, one travel agency used a slogan indicating that the tourists could retrace the historical routes of some nineteenth-century Italian explorers of southern Ethiopia (like Cecchi, Vanmutelli, Citermi, and Bottego). The reputation of the remarkably informative 1938 *Guida dell'Africa Italiana Orientale*, the publication of which was one of the first acts of the Italian occupation force in the country to legitimize and "normalize" its presence there, also played a significant role in creating Ethiopia as an Italian "tourist destination" (Consoziazione Turistica Italiana 1938). Tours were booked on which the visitors could take a plane to the grass airstrip near the small capital of the southwestern Maji district (the airstrip marked with a sign saying "The Wonderland Route," put there by a tourist agency) and then make a walking excursion with pack-mules and native porters into the Suri area. There the tourists lodged in tents, looked at the local people, took photographs of them, and engaged in some typical tourist bartering for material objects (the Suri lip-plates and ear-discs) as souvenirs. After spending a few days they left as they had come.

As we can see, the tourist interest in the Suri is undoubtedly based in part on "exoticism," the idea of going to a remote, isolated wilderness area "where hardly any whites had set foot" and where people are assumed to live in "pristine conditions of nature." This may go back to the renewed fascination in the (post) modern industrial world with the "radical others" outside industrial culture—and this time, due to the techno-economic conditions of globalization, it can be pursued as a mass-phenomenon. There is also a lingering heritage of the colonial gaze. As Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett note: "Tourism gives tribalism and colonialism a second life by bringing them back as representations of themselves and circulating them within an economy of performance" (1994:435). In the early eighties—before the tourist influx—the Suri were already known to a wider public, through folklore and tourist-guide texts,<sup>6</sup> as an exotic, strange, primitive people at the ends of Ethiopia (which was in itself a relatively unknown tourist destination). The Suri appearance was also fascinating: the women and girls wore big clay or wooden discs in their pierced lower lip and earlobes, and the virtually naked males had fine physiques and remarkable body scarifications and decorations made with bright natural paints.<sup>7</sup>

The coffee-table book and *National Geographic* article by photographers Beckwith and Fisher of 1990 and 1991 summarize this image of difference in a telling way. Their work contains a series of excellent photographs of the Suri, albeit only on some aspects of their way of life. The pictures evoke the impression of a very out-of-the-way and self-contained "happy" culture of complete African "others," in a somewhat romanticized way. The shots also appeal to the image of a remote, well integrated, and proud culture—almost the "noble savage" of old—and indeed, they help to *create* this



Young Suri woman with clay lip plate in Korum, Ethiopia. (Photo by Jon Abbink)

image. We see here a typical contemporary representation of a "tribal group" for the public eye of modern-industrial society, the genre of the exoticist, postcolonial photography of "natives." Needless to say, apart from granting that they may contain useful information and evoke fascination, what the pictures convey to us is incomplete.<sup>8</sup> They are not meant to be informative and analytic, but primarily evocative and aesthetic. We see that the image created by them is—as always with visual representations—in large part a reflection of the preoccupation or selective interests of the observers. As the photographic evocation of the Suri makes clear, both in professional and tourist form, difference and contrastive identity are essential elements in the encounter of opposites. Indeed, there is no effort, or indeed intention, by either Suri or tourist to come to a "mutual exchange" or an "understanding" between tourist and "native" except a purely businesslike one, even if the wish thereto may on occasion be rhetorically expressed (the photographic act is a major ingredient of the touristic appropriation of the Suri, a point further discussed below).

The inherent bias in the representation of the Suri, and of the tourist-Suri relationship (particularly acute in their case, as we shall see) is of course neither new nor surprising. It is rooted in the very encounter of "whites and natives" in non-Western parts of the world, conditioned as it is by tacit epistemological canons of colonial experience or a still in essence colonializing gaze. The Horn of Africa is no exception. A brief historical retrospect makes this clear.

### The Image of the Suri Since 1897

Following the various, scarce descriptions of the Suri in travel and colonial literature, one sees that the image of "primitiveness" was an inherent ideological element of the colonial penetration of the Sudan-Kenya-Ethiopia borderlands from the start.

The first to mention the Suri was the Russian officer A. K. Bulatovitch who was traveling with a contingent of Ethiopian emperor Menilik II's army on a campaign in the Southern Káfa area in January–April 1898 (see Bulatovitch 1900, 1902). There they met a people resembling, he said, the "Sciuro" (in reality they were the *Me'en*, a neighboring agropastoral people).<sup>9</sup> However, the author notes that the natives extracted their lower incisors, and the inserting of lip and ear discs by the women he described is even now a distinctive custom of the Suri.

After Bulatovitch, the Suri are mentioned again in an article by a member of the British border demarcation commission in 1909. C. Gwynn met someone he called the "chief of the tribe" at Turmu, an escarpment north of Mt. Naita, a big border mountain between Sudan and Ethiopia. He described the tribe's women as wearing "indescribably hideous" wooden or leather discs in the lower lip (Gwynn 1911:127). Like all travelers after them, these

two European observers felt the need to comment on the lip-plate custom and its, for them, unaesthetic appearance. This physical detail overrides all other information on this group, and emphasizing it has set a pattern reflected in all popular articles and tourist brochures written about them since, including the article and book by Beckwith and Fisher (1990; 1991).

From 1936 to 1941, Fascist Italy occupied Ethiopia and reports on the Suri came from Italian visiting travelers/businessmen or researchers.<sup>10</sup> The naming engineer C. Viezzer was probably the first to describe them and to publish photographs.<sup>11</sup> He pictures the Suri as a group living in very "primitive conditions," without cattle, cultivating poorly with primitive tools (Viezzer 1938:424–425). He praises their colorful body-painting and general physique, but predictably abhors the female custom of inserting wooden or clay lip-plates in the lower lip. He was one of the first to take photographs of this decoration, thus initiating the act so often repeated by visitors and tourists today. Viezzer also describes some rituals he observed, such as the spectacular burial of the wife of a chief. The language of the Tirmaga strikes him as primitive: "...suoni gutturali, animaleschi, assolutamente incomprensibile" (425). His picture of the Tirmaga-Suri is, of course, very incomplete and characterized by a predominantly negative or condescending evaluation of their way of life, fed by the author's own ignorance of how such a society works.

F. Rizetto (1941) also stayed among the (Tirmaga-) Suri, but for a longer period. His report contains more factual information on the group and adds some qualifications about their character as a people. One can frequently hear an echo of his remarks on "Suri character" among their present-day highland neighbors. For example, Rizetto notes, perhaps echoing local highland dwellers' opinion, that they are "ignorant, violent, thievish, arrogant and revengeful" (1204). But, he says, they are also proud of their country and their freedom. They go naked, but are generally of good build and health (1204). They live isolated, in blissful ignorance of the world outside, and on a primitive, timeless level (1205, 1209).

In 1938, the Suri were studied by M. Marchetti, an Italian working for a private company at the time. He passed four months in the Suri area and describes their three original subgroups, then known as Tirma, T'id, and Zil-mamo, in fairly detailed terms. Marchetti, though no social scientist, is the first to try to present a more balanced, matter-of-fact survey of Suri society, refraining from extreme evaluative statements about their character or level of cultural or intellectual development. He gives information on settlement patterns, cultivation practices, material culture, ornaments, food consumption, supernatural beliefs and customs related to marriage, burial, and, what he called, the "stick fight." Nevertheless, toward the end the author concludes his description with remarks about the "low level of social life" of the Suri, who are also "...assolutamente infantile come mentalità ed intelligenza" (e.g., their counting system "was underdeveloped") and they have "...una lingua assai semplice," their speech accompanied by expressive mimic, and often repeating words (Marchetti 1938:71). They are said to lack an oral his

torical tradition transmitted from parents to children—they only retain memory of the most recent events (71). Despite a good start, we again see the account ending in questionable, evaluative statements on the basis of outsider values, not very informative about Suri culture itself.

After 1941 there were few foreign or Ethiopian visitors in the Suri area. The Ethiopian government had a nominal presence until 1988 (when the few police and soldiers left the area), some intermittent tax collection, and a short-lived American mission post in the 1960s with an elementary school (up to fourth grade) and a small clinic. None of these episodes left any lasting imprint on the local society, and no reports are available from this period up to 1990.

The Suri have been part of a neglected and marginal region of Ethiopia, without roads, facilities, and government services. The area was viewed as a poor and unhealthy malarial lowland, where no Ethiopian would go of his own free will. The Suri people were considered to be “uncivilized nomads” without fixed abode. The Maji area served as a place of internal exile. Under the Mengistu-government (1977–1991), army commanders who had failed in the civil war were sent there to spend their days as civil servants. In the wider regional context, however, the Suri were never isolated. In the early decades of this century, they were connected to the cattle, game, and ivory trade in Ethiopia and Kenya. In the 1980s they smuggled in automatic weapons from Sudan and got involved in the gold trade (panned in rivers in southern Ethiopia) and in a network of Sudanese and Ethiopian traders. During the past



A ceremonial stick duel in progress among the Chari Suri. (Photo by Jon Abbink)

decade, a closer involvement of Suri with the Ethiopian authorities is notable (Abbink 2002).

In the early 1980s the Suri were “rediscovered” as a piece in what was stereotypically known as the “museum of peoples” of Ethiopia.<sup>12</sup> Some tourist agencies started organizing individual or small group trips to the Maji area, including the Suri country. Some of the tourists came with a guide of the Ethiopian National Tour Operators (NTO, a state agency), some with a personal guide from a private travel agency. Recent travel guidebooks on Ethiopia make mention of the “colorful” Suri people, describing their primitive material conditions but also their body paintings, lip- and ear-plates, and their spectacular ritual stick-dueling contests. Practical conditions for the tourists were difficult, but this was part of the attraction: to chart an allegedly unexplored culture at the margins of civilized society.

In fact, tourist trips regularly had to be cancelled due to security reasons. Until this day, foreign visitors, upon arrival in the area, may be officially forbidden by the local authorities to go down to the Suri due to fear of disturbances.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, during the 1990s, several hundreds of tourists visited the Suri, and this flow will continue in the near future.

### The Suri and the Tourist: Exchanges and Confrontations

The interaction of Suri and tourists is more of a “confrontation” than normal social interaction. Obviously, the language difference is the first problem. The Suri are monolingual, and the Ethiopian guides do not speak the Suri language. “Conversation” is carried out by means of gesticulation and shouting. Prior to contact with tourists, the Suri had only known white foreigners in the shape of Italian soldiers in the 1930s and American missionaries in the 1960s. Their experience with them was much better than with the tourists, basically because, as some Suri said, “. . . they were there for a long time” [several years] and “. . . tried to get along with us. They traded things, like food-stuff, cattle, sheep, and tried to talk with us.” However, the Suri quickly found out that the tourists of today were quite different from these earlier foreigners. Below, we look at the interaction from the two ends of the dyad.

#### The Suri View

The response of Suri, both men and women and the older and the younger generation, is remarkably similar. No doubt, the tourist presence will, in the near future, create a subgroup of Suri youngsters that can make a living on it and thus will suppress any feelings of disdain. But at present, the Suri are rather uniform in their display of bewilderment and irritation toward the foreign visitors. Two kinds of behavior strike the Suri as most characteris-

tic of the tourists: their taking photographs all the time, and their behaving in a childish, rude, and incomprehensible way, to the point of being bizarre.

Photography is of course a quintessential activity or posture of a tourist. It was noted by Susan Sontag in her pioneering book *On Photography*, that from the point of view of the tourist, the "... very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel. Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter" (1977:10). While this is true in a general sense for all sorts of tourists, in the case of the explorer-tourists among the Suri, there is the desire for "authentic documentation" of the otherness of these people (and occasionally for commercially marketable pictures).<sup>14</sup> However, Sontag has definitely hit on a defining element of the tourist: as a traveling person s/he wants to make sense of his/her experience, and needs to "frame" it in some way, and to relate it to his/her own world. This calls to mind Harkin's analysis (see above) of the tourist experience as a quest for framing and structuration of meaning through the management of a set of signs rooted in the tourist's own life-world.

One aspect of the photographic act is especially pertinent to the Suri case. As Susan Sontag has noted: "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and therefore, like power" (1977:4). The Suri being photographed are aware of this more than any other people and act accordingly: they say that no one should have this power over them, or if so, it should be compensated for by means of an appropriate monetary transaction.

Sontag also made the by now very familiar point that there "... is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera" (7). This is easy to observe in Suri-tourist exchanges. If an argument comes up over a specific photographing act, as is often the case, reactions very often take on an aggressive form: people are manhandled and those photographed try to get hold of the camera. In the case of one Japanese tourist group visiting in 1989, cameras were forcibly taken from them, thrown on the rocks, and destroyed. Suri irritation at cameras and photographing has nothing to do with the fear often ascribed to non-Western people that their "soul" or "well-being" is being taken away. Nothing of the kind. In this as in other things, the Suri are rationalists; they are well aware of how a camera works and what comes out of it. They only resent being "turned into an image or a souvenir" (9) that is taken away, and being limited in their interaction as adult humans with tourists they thought were other adult humans.

During fieldwork, observing interactions between tourists and Suri—always stunted because of translation problems and the insecure interpretation of gestures—I often noted Suri responses like the following: "You are not going to shoot me just like that, first give me the green leaves! [money]."<sup>15</sup> "For every one of us in the picture you pay us one note, now!" Turning toward me they said: "... Are they all like that, bothering us before they have done their duty and given us things? Tell them to cooperate!" "What is their

aim, what is it they do? If we are being fooled, we will not allow any picture taken here!" "Can we deal with people who behave unfair?"

Such remarks illustrate the Suri dislike of the absence of equal exchange with the tourists. The apparent value tourists attach to taking pictures of them, but not taking their time and not communicating to them breeds deep irritation. Suri often forbade tourists outright from taking pictures or even sitting in their village; they also asked what they knew were outrageous prices for some of their cultural items (lip plates, wooden stools, leather decorations, calabashes) when tourists expressed any interest to buy them. In doing so the Suri also ridiculed the tourists' wish to have everything. For instance, some tourists even wanted the special ivory bracelets worn by male members of the chiefly clan, but did not know that these can never be sold and even if they heard about this would not desist.

Similar abrasive responses have been noted among the Mursi, the people neighboring the Suri, who are culturally very much alike. For instance, in response to his question of what they thought that tourists were doing, the anthropologist D. Turton quotes the following remarks from Mursi friends: "... You tell us: why do they shoot [photograph] us? ... They can't speak our language so we can't ask them why they are doing it. ... They come with Ethiopian guides who just sit in cars. When the tourists have taken their photos they drive off. We say: 'Is it just that they want to know who we are, or what?' We say: 'They must be people who don't know how to behave.' Even old women come and titter about taking photos. 'Is that the way whites normally behave?' That's what we say. Goloñimeri [the Mursi name for Turton]. What are they doing? Do they want us to become their children, or what? What do they do with the photographs?" Finally: "This photography business comes from your country—where the necklace beads grow. You whites are the culprits. Give us a car and we'll go and take pictures of you" (Turton 1994:286).<sup>16</sup> The only difference between Mursi and Suri is perhaps that the latter are in general more annoyed and aggressive in actually demanding money for the photographs, and also actively obstruct their being photographed if the tourists try to duck payment.

Photography is an essential element of the tourist gaze (cf. Urry 1990:140)—it expresses the token appropriation of the objects, landscapes, or people. The photographic act thus illustrates the underlying tourist concern with the visual, the aesthetic representation of experience. Here lies the link with the characteristic tourist desire for the consuming of ever-new images and experiences and that makes him/her the quintessential expression of post-modern consumer identity. As Sontag already noted, "... Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted" (1977:24). In semiotic terms, for the tourist the picture becomes not only the visual sign of "having been there" but also of having captured the "reality" of the signified.

In the literature it has often been remarked that tourist behavior exemplifies license, a release from everyday obligations and norms "Immoral"

behavior (cf. Urry 1990:10). The manners and "civilizational standards" of tourists sometimes may or may not be greatly at variance with local mores, especially in very divergent cross-cultural settings. But the very structure of the encounter is a determining factor in bringing out behavior among tourists that is beyond "normal" bounds. The temporality, displacement, language difference, and perception of "distance" seem to cancel out the need for meaningful or respectful social contact, or some element of reciprocity. In the tourist game, a relationship is a commodity, and as the fleeting encounter of people will not ever be repeated, freedom from reciprocal norms seems guaranteed. Restraint or respect according to the local norms is secondary. The people visited are, so to speak, just part of the landscape, not meaningful social partners: a landscape cannot (and should not) have an opinion about people, as Nietzsche once said. But what is usually not treated in much detail in the literature on tourist-native interaction is the *actual* behavior of tourists in their contacts with locals and the effect this has on the latter.

From numerous interviews and observations I noted that the Suri and other local people neighboring them (Dizi and village people, who usually act as guides and porters for the tourists) are always amazed if not shocked by the "dirty," "uncontrolled," and "shameless" demeanor of the tourists. For example, they fart in public without inhibition, they urinate and defecate in plain sight of the porters and the local people, males and females demonstratively kiss and embrace each other in public, others frequently argue and shout to each other, often the couples. They also quickly show anger and other emotions, like children. This is all contrary to local standards of decent or adult behavior. Perhaps this kind of behavior is in principle still unacceptable, or at least questionable, in the tourists' own society as well. But the point is that here, in the "liminal phase" that trekking represents, tourists think they can afford to dispense with ordinary standards and manners because they suppose the natives have no such manners either. These "natives," however, were offended time and again, and their former image of the "polite" or "developed" foreigner became seriously dented. As a result, scorn and disdain are becoming the dominant feelings toward foreigners. Originally, Suri (and Mursi) approached white foreigners with some kind of awe or respect, expressed in their using the term *barári*, which means "having power" or "being hot," in the sense of "dangerous."<sup>17</sup> Today, this word is never used for any tourist.

### The Tourist View

The other end of the dyad, the point of view of the tourists, must also be looked at. Here, the effect of the encounter is also upsetting. The main reason is that the Suri do not behave as the tourist frame of reference would expect them to behave. If the tourist encounter is seen as a kind of ritual, i.e. as a form of "scripted play" with some predictability or at least markedness, then

the Suri do not give evidence of wanting to recognize that script. Numerous incidents illustrate this pattern. I take a few from observations and interviews with tourists in 1990–1994. The baseline in all these stories is the feeling of deception, indignation, and anger.

- In 1994 one group of Italian tourists came to a village to meet the Suri but was sent back after refusing to pay money for photographs and the daily "tourist tax." They claimed they had already paid that money (and money for their visas) to the NTO. They were adamant, but so were the Suri. As the latter had automatic rifles, the Italians did not insist and went back without having taken any pictures.
- In another incident in 1994, a small group of German tourists were threatened at gunpoint to give money, medicines, clothes, and razor blades. Some girls in the group panicked and dramatically started begging the Suri men not to shoot. Others started crying. In a state of shock they left the area.
- One elderly American couple with a private guide whom I met shortly after their return from the Suri area in 1995 told me about their utter disappointment and indignation about having been subjected to constant shouting and pushing by the Suri, who incessantly demanded money and other things. They said that they had cut short their visit among them, and that they "... had never met such impolite and rude behavior anywhere in the world."
- A Belgian tourist who was in the area in late 1994 was asked to pay huge sums of money because of his desire to take hundreds of photographs. His main interest was, as he phrased it to me, "... to see and photograph naked tribesmen in their original state, untouched by outside civilization." He stated that he loved the country and people, and would stay long among them. But finally he just had to pay up, and only then could move through the area. Afterward, he expressed to me his disappointment and his indignation at the efforts and financial sacrifices that he had to make to get his pictures. He said he loathed the Suri for their extreme monetary greed, and would never visit them again.
- In 1990, a group of about twenty Japanese tourists were bathing in the Kibish River in Suri territory. When they came out, they found that all their clothes, cameras, and bags had been stolen. Great indignation. No Suri claimed to have seen the thieves. After long deliberations with some local Suri spokesmen, some of the things were recovered. The tourists quickly left the Suri area, baffled and disturbed.

In Ethiopian terms, the Suri are exceptional in their response to tourists. Indeed, no group in Ethiopia routinely demands a sum of money from foreigners who come to visit them. In 1996, the Suri asked 150 *birr* (about

US\$25) per tourist per day to be paid to their newly founded local "Surma Council," in addition to the money to be paid for individual photographs.<sup>18</sup> Nor do they mind being assertive, even aggressive, in their dealings with foreigners who come there for a few days. They say that this is their own country, so the people who visit them should pay just for being there, and they do not trust the motives of the tourists. Few local populations harass or threaten the tourists during their actual "meeting": in most places the "realist illusion" is somehow kept up because of the material benefits that accrue. Obviously, Suri also want the material benefits, driven by a logic introduced or made acutely relevant by the tourist presence, but underneath their attitude lies a deep irritation about the perceived power difference and arrogance of tourists not wanting to engage in meaningful contact and behaving like children. Their tactic is not one of terrorism, but it is one of intimidation; my own impression is that they would be even more violent if their religious leaders did not restrain them.

It is interesting to note that the travel agents who sell these trips do not warn their customers about such problems (except in very general terms, so as to make them appear part of the attraction of the trip): they do not intend to disturb the illusion of realism before they have dispatched their clients and cashed their checks.

In analyzing staged Maasai performances for tourists on the farm of the British-Kenyan Mayer family, Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett remarked that "... the Maasai and the Mayers are merely players in a show written by international tourist discourse" (1994:467). The Suri are an example of the opposite. They give clear evidence of a refusal to be incorporated as actors in the triadic tourist game (Suri—state agents/guides—foreign tourists). In a radical way they *refuse to act as a party in the relationship*, rejecting its terms and thus their inclusion into a system of meaning of others. In contrast to peoples who have been exposed for longer periods to external contacts and who are willing to see the advantages of an encounter with tourism—cf. the Balinese, the Maltese (Boissevain 1986), the Toraja (Volkman 1990), or the Maasai (Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994)—the Suri consciously intend to keep the visitors at bay. If they do respond to them, it is in a remarkably exploitative way; for them, tourists are the last in a long line of visitors who intend to incorporate them into their scheme of things, be it the state administration, the colonial structure (the Italians), the army, tax gatherers, and so on. They resist them like they have resisted the latter: by militant and aggressive self-assertion.

### The Clash of Identities and the Reinforcement of Group Boundaries

The meeting of Suri and tourists described above refers to a relatively new contact situation: before about 1988, the Suri were simply not visited by tourists, and they were not familiar with such a category of people. But the

friction is probably common at all locations where tourists are now an established feature of the social landscape. A study of such a situation in its "pristine form" reveals an ultimately irreconcilable clash of cultural interests between the locals and the tourists, despite all the compromises and accommodations that are developed later when it has become clear that the tourists will not leave the place alone.

We might also say that in the encounter of Suri and tourists, "violence" is produced (cf. Mudimbe 1994): both symbolic (because of imposition and power difference) and physical (pushing and hitting, stealing of property, and threats, sometimes at gunpoint). The second could be seen as a response to the first. The tourists—though equipped with plenty of money and material goods—feel very tense, and come to see their being there as indeed having an element of force. The conditions of discourse and "exchange" are imposed, meaningful contact is precluded, and they are obliged to constantly and unpleasantly negotiate on commercial values: money for pictures and for objects, gifts of razors, soap, cloth, and so on. There are no reciprocal terms of exchange known in advance but only exploitative ones, realized in what both parties know is a, not to be repeated, one-off encounter.

All this inhibits and structurally precludes normal social exchange and enhances antagonism. What the tourists do not immediately see is that this clash is *predicated upon the very motive of their coming there*, as adventurers would-be explorers with their "social centre" (Cohen 1979:183) elsewhere but who come to discover the unknown other, a "remote primitive tribe." This explorer-experience goes back to an old Western trope and still functions as an ideological trapping cultivated by the travel agencies that market such trips. It may or may not be related to the cultural ambiguity of modern industrial society with its lingering nostalgia for a lost past (Graburn 1996:166) and its residual feelings of alienation (MacCannell 1976). But more importantly it must be seen as part of the great tourist game of producing "realism" in an unambiguous, marked domain where people from both sides are expected to "follow the rules."

From the point of view of the tourists, their encounter with the Suri is a case of "failed framing": due to Suri resistance against the social model of subordinate exchange and the rendering of "services," most (though not all) tourists feel disoriented. They, as white visitors, are pushed back to their elementary identity as "intruders" and are confronted with the limited power of their resources (money) and status (as "white, developed" people). Their illusion of authentic realism is punctured, and their image of a pristine tribe with its own codes and customs happily and generously shared with outsiders, battered. One could say that the Suri have become so "authentic" with their very original "rude, savage, and uncontrolled" behavior that they defy the tourist script to the point of breaking it up.

The Suri example shows once again that the confrontation of "otherness" both for the tourist and for the local people visited can reinforce group consciousness (see also MacCannell 1984). Increased contact between



ethnocultural groups does *not* automatically produce mutual understanding or the management of difference: more often it leads to the opposite.<sup>19</sup> In this case, of course, this is enhanced by the fact of spatiotemporal remoteness reproduced in the very encounter of locals and tourists: the latter will go back and are there *because* they cherish the fact that they are on the verge of going back to their social peers, which allows them to gaze at the differences separating them from those who will stay there in their full "otherness."

For the Suri, the encounter initially produces a redrawing of their group identity as "strangers" to the visitors. As remarked earlier, they are acutely aware of this fact. Their group consciousness—traditionally already characterized by high self-esteem, by a strongly shared normative culture centered on cattle, and by a tacit contempt for all others—is also reinforced by their actual dealings with tourists. Their disdain for them has underlined their conviction that only they themselves are what they call "real adult people" (in Suri: *hiri mi*). While they appreciate the ingenuity of some of the material culture items that the tourists bring and do not reject the money to be gained, they cannot take them seriously as persons. Inadvertently, therefore, their exposure to tourists may have brought about a reevaluation of their own way of life.

### Suri, Tourism, and Development

Above, we noted that Suri resist their unquestioned annexation into the tourist discourse, and in their encounter with tourists develop more self-consciousness about the value of their own ethnocultural tradition. They do not aspire to "become like them." This phenomenon underlines Cohen's conclusions about the mixed effects of "commodification" in tourism: some local cultural values may be negatively affected but others may be redefined or reinforced (1988). It has to be noted, however, that much will depend on the extent and manner of outside interventions.

The relative autonomy and independence of the Suri way of life, and their ability to "resist" or "contest" the tourist challenge, will gradually erode, and social transformations will occur. Tourists will keep coming, there has been a foreign missionary station among them since 1990, and government political interference has become stronger since 1991.

The Suri will also find themselves increasingly connected to the global economy. This is most obvious in the recent National Parks Project. The European Union has financed a large, five-year development project in Ethiopia (of some 16 million ECU) to upgrade and redevelop the national parks and game reserves in the south of the country, with the underlying aim of stimulating wildlife tourism from the EU to Ethiopia (on the basis of the example of Kenya). These plans, fuelled by global concerns about wildlife diversity and conservation as well as by the long-term commercial interests of the tourist sector, did not initially consider the position of the Suri and other

local groups. Of course, the Suri experience with future game park tourism may have some tangible benefits, certainly in the short-term: for example, the influx of cash. In the project plans, roads, clinics, schools, and the drilling of water holes<sup>20</sup> were also promised. Some of these have been realized. However, when the EU project that provided finances and manpower receded after some years (the project was phased out in 1999), the Ethiopian government was not able to uphold the level of local services or infrastructure, and the improvements are withering away. Moreover, a largely nonlocal elite from the capital are profiting from the proceeds of tourism, not the average Suri.

In the EU plans, the park areas were seen as an "impressive wilderness" (the tourist image), with the implication that human populations had always been marginal to their existence—although the park areas had known human existence for thousands of years and indeed owed their state to prolonged human activity (Turton 1996:107). In this context we see two rather different views of what is "real." There was little detail in the plans about the effective integration of local people's (underestimated) knowledge about ecological management, or their need for living space, or the importance of cultural values; the globalist model of top-down planning aimed at "conservation" and "tourist management" seems to have taken precedence. It might be advisable for development-oriented people (government agents, NGO people, and those in the Game Park Project) not only to take into effective account the presence, attitudes, and sociocultural aspirations of local people but also to recognize their right (as the most ancient and most knowledgeable inhabitants of the area) to have their identity as active local *subjects* respected.<sup>21</sup> In view of the increasing global flows, local identity in general is becoming more and more fragile (cf. Appadurai 1995). If these local interests and sensibilities are not recognized in such globalist schemes, drawn up largely on the basis of a Western approach, problems will arise. If a real role for local populations is not envisaged, the latter can easily resort to ways of undermining game park tourism, for instance by killing the animals in the park and causing security problems for tourists and others.

### Conclusions: Globalization, Exotopy, and Suri Identity

While tourism itself is a phenomenon of considerable antiquity, by the early twenty-first century global conditions allow a large portion of the post-modern industrialized world to indulge in it. The existence of diverging values will always cause tensions in the tourist-"native" encounter, and this holds not only in Ethiopia but in any other country, the developed West included (see the studies in Boissevain 1996).

The Suri experience tourism as a disturbance and as a hegemonic strategy to be resisted. They refuse to be "signs" (of primitiveness, backwardness, tribalism, etc.) in a system of meaning of tourists that allows no reciprocity. The tourist effort toward inclusion is resisted by radical self-assertion and

obstruction, whereby the Suri subvert the script of tourist realism. They refuse to be wrapped and taken home. So far, tourism among the Suri has not undermined their society but reinforced local values and self-esteem. At the same time, they are introduced to the charged symbolism of material exchange through money: money is the new means by which their group culture and artifacts are commoditized and expressed. Lacking another means of meaningful communication in the encounter with tourists, they capitalize upon money and thus are drawn into the idiom of "consumerism" themselves.

Contemporary tourist identity is a characteristic global consumer identity that has far-reaching implications in a socioeconomic and also moral sense. Tourism is an inevitable phenomenon, enhanced by conditions of modern technology and travel facilities, which diminish the costs of mobility and strengthen notions of virtual "simultaneity" of place and of experience. In view of the reactions tourism initially seems to evoke in the local settings it penetrates, it is also *inherently* problematic and conflictual, despite its highly ritualized character. The impact, role, and motivations of tourists need to be reevaluated continuously. For instance, at the present historical juncture, it is highly questionable whether tourists really search for authenticity that they are said to lack in their own daily lives. This claim, made by MacCannell in his landmark book, *The Tourist* (1976), has been challenged by Cohen (1979, 1988) and Urry (1990), among others. My interpretation is also that postmodern consumer tourists are much more cynical, and are very conscious (not to say arrogant) about the unassailable advance they, as members of a developed industrial/information-age society, have over people of the not so wealthy, or as they see it, not well organized—or worse, "primitive" or "chaotic"—societies they visit. That tourists go there is a result of the commoditization of local culture or landscape in tourist discourse on the home front: a discourse of status competition that structurally negates initial personal motives of a "sincere interest in the other." Tourists' exploration of these other societies and people is thus primarily to be seen as an act of self-confirmation or congratulation among social peers in their own society, and not of seeking "lost values" or an authentic or affectively rewarding life in the exotope, the visited locations outside one's own familiar sociocultural space.

Tourism is another act in the polittocultural drama of hegemonic strife between the global poles variously defined as rich and poor, north and south, developed and underdeveloped. As we saw in the case above, the Suri will be "made safe" for mass tourism through the noble aim of wildlife protection. The question remains whether a local society like the Suri, subjected unwillingly to tourists, can marshal its few resources of "counter-discourse" to enhance its interests and collective identity in this political arena where the local and the global meet, or can only resist temporarily before the onslaught of globalizing consumer patterns. Of course, the latter scenario seems more likely, however much one might regret it.

Source: Adapted from "Tourism and Its Discontents: Suri-Tourism Encounters in Southern Ethiopia," *Social Anthropology*, 2000, 8:1-17.

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### Notes

1. Especially among neighboring groups they are known as *Surma*. Most commonly used self-names are Chai and Tirmaga (two sub-groups).
2. Ambivalence toward tourists is of course not uncommon among social science researchers. Middleton considers the tourists on the Swahili coast as "cultural illiterates" (1991:vii) and sees the tourist trade as "... a final form of colonialism" and as "... the most degrading exploitation of the Swahili coast" (1991:53).
3. Neither would the persistent ambivalence of the tourist enterprise be explained: why do tourists get irritated by other tourists, and why is the general image of the tourist so invariably negative? (Cf. the quotes on the first page of Urry's 1990 book.)
4. In contrast to, for example, coastal tourism in Kenya (see Peake 1989, Sindiga 1996). As treated in, for example, Cohen 1979, MacCannell 1976, or Urry 1990.
5. One of them an Ethiopian one: see N. Donovan & J. Last, 1980, *Ethiopian Costumes*. Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Tourism Commission, p. 24-25 (reprinted 1991).
6. Perhaps one can recognize here something of the "Riefenstahl syndrome."
7. Good explanatory text might have helped here, but G. Hancock's chapter on the Surma and related groups (Beckwith and Fisher 1990) leaves much to be desired. The Beckwith-Fisher article of 1991 contains very little text.
8. For a brief survey, see Abbink 2002.
9. Marchetti 1939, Rizetto 1941, Viezzer 1938.
10. Although Arnold Hodson, British consul in Maji in the early 1920s, published a photograph of the "Kachubo"-Surma (these are the Kachejo or Balé-Surma, living on the Boma Plateau in Sudan) in 1929 (see Hodson 1929:207).
11. The Italian scholar C. Conti Rossini was the first to call Ethiopia "... un museo di popoli" in the book *L. Abissinia* (Rome 1929, p. 20).
12. When I was in the field in 1994, a group of German tourists was called back by the authorities and had to fly back to Addis Ababa without having seen the Surma. Similar incidents were recorded in recent years.
13. This was the case with the Beckwith-Fisher expedition of 1988, and of one Belgian tourist-photographer of my acquaintance, who toured among the Surma in 1994. Both came back with pictures that they used in publications, or which they were about to sell or publicly exhibit.
14. The Ethiopian one-hirt notes given are green.
15. See also the Granada TV ("Disappearing Wood") film on the Murst, called *Nibba* (1991). The most recent film on the Murst is *For Will Eat Us*, Granada TV for Channel 4 Television (K. E. 2001).

- 17 This term is also applied to the innate "power" of their religious chiefs and to certain ritually important plants.
- 18 That no Surma outside this council benefits from it, is of secondary importance.
- 19 The conditions under which exposure to and experience with cultural differences *reinforce* group boundaries, generate antagonistic images or actual conflict are not yet well addressed in globalization studies (cf. Sindiga 1996:431).
- 20 These were announced in the first (1993) program-document of the Agriconsulting Group which made a feasibility study for the project.
- 21 This argument is forcefully made in a very interesting, unpublished paper by David Turton (1995).

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