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Losing the Plot: Environmental Problems and Livelihood Strife in Developing Rural Ethiopia—Suri Agropastoralism Vs. State Resource Use

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Introduction

Agropastoral economies of Ethiopia cover an important land surface (ca. 40%) and produce a substantial number of items, from milk, meat, hides, skins and animals for export, next to providing livelihoods to several millions of people in often precarious areas with low rainfall. Land use in such semi-arid agropastoral areas of Ethiopia is geared to the spread and relative scarcity of resources and historically took place in relatively sustainable patterns. Today growing population pressure, competition from cultivators, and climate change/variability undermine productive conditions. The lands inhabited by agropastoralists are now also being redefined for use and resource extraction in macro-growth model policies that insufficiently connect to the existing economies and environmental conditions in place. The reasons for this are of a primary political (establishment of state authority in ‘marginal areas’) and economic (national export

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development, direct land access/expropriation, new energy resource construction, such as hydro-dams) but have social and hegemonic aspects as well. Environmental–ecological considerations are not paramount in these policies, which are rather fed by perceptions of ‘near-empty, poor and remote lands’ with people that ‘need education, employment and modernity.’

Also the Lower Omo Valley of Southwest Ethiopia, a previously ‘remote area’ (as seen from the political center), is the scene of massive ‘development’ ventures via infrastructure works, roads, and large-scale agrarian plantations for mono-crops like sugar, cotton, or biofuels. They affect virtually all local peoples (e.g., Mursi, Me’en, Suri, Kara, Kwegu, Nyangatom), many of them agropastoralists. The area is described well in a growing number of studies, and its problems are much discussed in the wider popular press and by advocacy groups (e.g., Oakland Institute 2013a, b; Perry 2015; HRW 2012, 2017; Newsome 2015; Temperley 2015; Vidal 2015). But the region’s transformation marches on inexorably and is not significantly modified to address looming environmental decline, ecological imbalance, and new socioeconomic dependency of local peoples.¹

This chapter discusses an example of one locally affected group, the Suri people, one of the ‘marginal’ agropastoralist groups living in this now coveted Ethiopian territory and in a double quandary: They face (a) territorial shrinkage and (b) a qualitative decline of the local ecological conditions, disturbing their economic system of cultivation, artisanal mining, gathering, and especially transhumant pastoralism. And related to this, they become more dependent on outsiders instead of on their own resources. Their environmental skills and knowledge are deemed irrelevant in models of ‘modernized’ large-scale commercial agriculture for export crops. The future of livelihood systems and of the people themselves is—in the view of the Ethiopian state elites—to be altered radically. I will outline this state-led modernization project—supported by World Bank money and some donor countries²—that has already drawn a trail of irreversible landscape alteration and which has not provided more opportunities for local people but made them, and the local ecology, more vulnerable. The Ethiopian state is an undiminished

example of what J. Scott (1998), J. Markakis (2011), and others have described as a top-down central planning machine that makes blueprints and applies them with little contextual adaptation, and with citizens approached as subjects to be made legible in, and dependent on, the national project.

In this interpretive case study, based on long-term field observations in the last 15 years as well as on interviews with some administrators and local experts, I describe some key economic and environmental aspects of this expansion for the Suri people, in conjunction with political and cultural concomitants of the exercise. Some comparative notes on neighboring groups facing the same challenges will also be made. A political ecology approach forces itself upon this case study: 'nature' and 'environment' interact with humans in specific political and economic constellations impacted by power differences. The interdisciplinary political ecology approach can help to see how developmental trajectories and environmental changes are produced by a governmental politics of resource definition and appropriation that can have *direct* consequences for local ecological conditions, thereby rearranging power and dependency relations. The power dimension is essential in estimating the causalities of livelihood and environmental change in the Omo Basin, as it reveals the project of state expansion and political command structure installation in the area.

The developmental expansion of the federal Ethiopian state in marginal peripheries since ca. 2008 is substantial, and ostensibly done for the 'national benefit' and overall economic development. The wealth and profits to be generated from the new infrastructural, energy, and agrarian projects would be 'for all' and would modernize lifeways and raise standards of living. However, in this epic state venture, local peoples active in agropastoralism, agrarian cultivation, fishing and hunting-gathering livelihoods have little to offer and are relegated to a secondary position: their predominantly subsistence economies and local knowledge systems are seen as 'backward' and as 'under-exploiting' the resources of the region, not yielding profits (for the state). Basic differences as to the perception and valuation of space, place, and the natural environment have become evident, and these are rooted in the political ecology of space (cf. Korf and Schetter 2012). D. Turton

already demonstrated in a seminal paper (2011) that this contestation, if not conflict, is related to both political–economic as well as sociocultural differences in approach to the ‘natural environment,’ the landscape and its management, and even in the definition of what ‘nature’ or the ‘environment’ *is*. As Wagstaff noted in a (2015) study, elements of cultural hegemonism are clearly visible: The Ethiopian state seems to find these people primitive and embarrassing in their way of life—e.g., their bodily culture, lack of ‘literacy’ and modern knowledge, specific customs of mourning, dueling, etc. Thus, the state is reproducing, in similar form, the denigrating narratives of the past (cf. Ellison 2012).

The transformation of people like the Suri agropastoralists is framed in this context of national economic development and civilizational discourse that the Ethiopian government initiated in the area. The process is perhaps another instance of the ‘great transformation,’ the radical change in human society famously described by Karl Polanyi in his book *The Great Transformation* (2001 [1944]), whereby a largely subsistence-oriented social economy is turned into a market-oriented commercial society based on gradual commodification, with important social, political, and environmental consequences. But in Ethiopia, it is strongly *orchestrated* along a scale of values and intrusive governance techniques defined, indeed imposed, by the state. We here look at the redefinition of ‘space’ and ‘place’ of local groups vs. the state as cultural, not only economic, concepts, and at the adverse environmental effects, suggesting gradual ecological decline and impoverishment.

A related argument of the paper will be that not only ecological preconditions for sustainability are eroding in many settings of the rural-developmental enterprise, but also that customary ethno-ecological knowledge of local peoples is receding, displaced by a discourse of direct exploitative appropriation of the environmental ‘resources’ that ‘do not need’ contextual appraisal. This tends to cause disequilibrium and in the longer-term ecological deterioration (in soil and water quality, biodiversity, and productivity). There are good reasons to expect another local ‘crunch’ that will undermine sustainability and ecosystem stability. In its radical development policies, as laid down in the ‘Growth and Transformation Plans’ (GTPs) I and II (2010–2015 and 2015–2020),

the Ethiopian government, with perhaps good intentions, also seems to renege on earlier ventures to commit (with donor funding) to good environmental management, sustainability, and biodiversity policies (cf. FDRE and UNDP 2006).

In most places in Africa, including densely populated Ethiopia, there is inevitable contestation over resources and their use, and over space and place and their cultural ramifications. This subject in general has been well studied within global contexts of economic expansion, dispossession, and exploitation (Li 2010; Sassen 2014). In recent years, a real flood of new studies has highlighted these processes in Ethiopia; here also, development implies destruction and forced change (cf. Ashkenazi 2012). On Southern Ethiopia, especially the South Omo Zone, there are many studies of space and place mutations (Turton 2011; Girke 2013; Eyasu and Feyera 2010; Seyoum 2015; Tsegaye 2016; Wagstaff 2015, etc.), as well as numerous press reports on the environmental changes.³

Basic local perceptions of livelihood and environment or of ‘nature’ and ecological conditions in Southwest Ethiopia are in stark opposition to those of the new claimants to the land: the state agencies, commercial companies, and private/foreign investors.⁴ Some peoples, like the Suri, living west of the Omo River and south and west of Maji town, are faced with the physical and social ‘shrinkage’ of space and the subversion of their homeland and orientation of place. They are not even ‘localized,’ i.e., put in their own small place (cf. Turton 2005, 258, 271 on the Mursi), but seem to even meet a denial of their right to *be* there, as their lands are potential state investors’ territory. A similar process was visible among the Mela people east of the Omo (cf. Buffavand 2016, 2017; Stevenson and Buffavand, forthcoming).

A case study⁵ on Suri illustrates current processes and policies of state-making via land-oriented sovereignty claims, buttressed by a legal framework subverting local citizens as economically and politically relevant agents, and whereby the ‘ethno-ecology,’ the customary interactive livelihood system of—in this case—the local agro-pastoralists as customary keepers of the land, tends to be denied or deleted.

The first part of this chapter will elaborate more on the geographical and ethnic conditions and some aspects of local perspectives of space,

place, and territoriality among groups in the Ethiopian Southwest, and indicate their different modes of adaptation so far. The second part is about the ‘landscape reconstruction’ effected by the Ethiopian state and its developmental ventures. The third part contrasts ‘ethno-ecological’ views of local peoples—especially the Suri—with the perspectives brought by the state and its redefinition of this former ‘periphery’ both environmentally and socially. It will appear that the local ‘ethno-landscape’ as created by Suri (and neighboring groups) is not seen as something of value or to be preserved as managed by state-induced investors and administrators. Political ecology—here in the sense of an organized, state-led process of reassigning ‘resources’ and power—is seen to trump the cultural ecology that marked the local peoples and their environmental interactions based on adaptation. The experience of livelihood change and households adrift shows the problematic social and environmental reconfigurations. The final part is the conclusion, summarizing the argument and the preliminary findings.

The Lower Omo Valley

The Omo Valley is a region with great landscape and hydrological variety. It has been inhabited for several thousand years although in low densities and largely ‘managed’ by local peoples (cf. Gil-Romera et al. 2011). It is an area of hot plains and low hills but with cool mountains in the Dizi and Me’*en* areas north of the town of Maji, and in the Southwest (Mt. Naita).⁶ The soils in the Suri area are mostly fluvisols with some patches of lixisols in the central area, ferralsols more to the east toward the Omo, and calcisols along the border with South Sudan (cf. FAO Soil Profile Database 1998; Belete et al. 2013, 23).⁷ The mountainous parts and foothills still have montane forests and diverse plant and wildlife, although rapidly declining. The Omo River bank forests are a place of rich wildlife and biodiversity (cf. Carr 2017, 18–19, 68, 69, 95, 151). As a whole, the Omo Valley basin fulfills essential functions in a wider regional ecology and hydrology of Southwest Ethiopia up to Lake Turkana in Kenya (Avery 2012), and in 2016–2017 provides still rich, but diminishing resources for agriculture,

hunting and gathering, livestock keeping, as well as beekeeping and alluvial gold panning, all traditionally carried out by the local peoples.

The southeastern parts of the Suri area, bordering Nyangatom settlements, are rather poor and semi-arid, but planned by the Ethiopian government to be filled with sugarcane plantations (Fig. 6.2) and to be irrigated with massive flows of water from the Omo. This area of mainly low bush and grass plains was used for hunting and gathering by local people and for shifting cultivation by newly settled Nyangatom after ca. 1995, but is now gradually closed off. Rainfall in the Valley ranges from over 1800 mm/year⁸ in the Northern and Western parts of the basin to less than 300 mm/year near Lake Turkana. Agropastoralism—combining extensive, transhumant livestock holding, and cultivation on rotating fields, often changed—is the best economic strategy, attuned to the local ecology and based on (limited) mobility. It was practiced for ages and has allowed sustainable livelihoods and environmental continuity. Along the rivers (especially the Omo), land is (was) used for river-bank cultivation, which yielded good harvests and had great potential down along the Omo (see Eyasu et al. 2015). But it is now strongly discouraged by the government. Bodi (Mela-Chirim) and many Mursi people can now no longer reach the Omo river banks due to the sugar plantations (see below) and are seriously constrained in their resource use, even in basic cultivation.

Since the Lower Omo area became part of the Ethiopian state in the 1890s, the agropastoral production systems were never invested in; rather they were exploited (slave and serf labor power, cattle predation; cf. Garretson 1986). Also under the present EPRDF government, investments in sustainable agropastoralism and local knowledge systems, that have evolved over time, are not seen worth it, in contrast to a growing body of scientific insights showing (agro)pastoralism profitable and appropriate (e.g., Behnke and Kerven 2013; Breu et al. 2015; Krätli et al. 2015). Among the local ethnic groups in the area, the Me'en north of the Omo River have in addition to mixed subsistence agriculture developed the cash crop production of coffee, wheat, *t'eff* (*Eragrostis tef*) and sesame, sold to highlander traders.

The Lower Omo Valley was long considered a 'wilderness area' *par excellence*—remote, peripheral and, according both to the first Western

travelers (C. Bulpett, A. Bulatovich, D. Smith, V. Bòttego) and the Ethiopian highlanders who came there in the early 1900s, inhabited by mostly ‘backward and uncivilized people.’ But it is now spatially redefined as a prime economic area that will bring ‘export revenue’ and profits due to commercial agriculture, large hydro-electricity dams, as well as gold mining, taken over from locals.

The People and the Context

The agropastoral Suri (ca. 34,000 people⁹) live in the Bench-Maji Zone of the Southern Regional State of Ethiopia, an area of savannah lowland and mountains of ca. 1800–2500 m. Their *woreda* (= district) area of some 4700 km² borders South Sudan and has a mixed altitude level, consisting of hills (10%), lower rugged areas (35%), and savanna plains (55%) with several rivers transecting the area (Tum, Kaari, Koka, and Kibish). The land shows substantial flora and fauna species diversity, is semi-arid in lowland places and vulnerable to variable rainfall, but has sufficient water in the hills. As noted above, soil fertility is mixed, but the area has good grazing lands for livestock. The lower savannah areas are mostly inhabited by Suri, Nyangatom, and by some Me’en groups (Mela, Chirim, Nyomoni),¹⁰ while the cooler mountains and foothills are the home of Dizi (an Omotic-speaking group) and various highland Me’en groups (with rainfall of up to 2500 mm/year). But Suri traditionally also had villages in the hills of Tirma and Naita near the border with Sudan, before being chased out by force by Nyangatom in the late 1980s. In fact, Suri always preferred the cooler hills for horticulture and staple crop fields, and used the plains for livestock herding, a ‘dual pattern’ of settlement and eco-niche use that was in place for several hundred years, although highly mobile.

The Suri traditionally have a food-secure economy—with seasonal dips—but today face particularly acute problems of survival and conflict. They went through a period of crisis and turmoil notably in the past 30 years, due to state encroachment, regional population growth, effects of the Sudanese civil war, and growing inter-group competition due to reduction of territory. Signs of climate change effects are noted

(slow drying out of the area, and water and pasture scarcity), but are not yet pervasive. Conflict is evident in clashes with neighboring groups—Nyangatom, Anywa, and Sudanese (Toposa) infiltrators (see Abbink 2009a; Wagstaff 2015)—and the state agents (government administration, agrarian investors, and army units) coming to their land. Other neighbors with whom ambivalent tensions have long existed are the Dizi (some 36,000) who are sedentary agrarian cultivators, and the shifting cultivator and mixed farmer Me'en people (ca. 155,000).¹¹ Especially, in conflict with Toposa and Nyangatom, numerous people were killed over the past two decades, with nefarious consequences for the social fabric of local society. Internal Suri strife has also increased notably. The Suri being a 'famous' people in the global tourist discourse (many photo books, touristic articles, and documentaries¹²) has not helped them in developing means or connections to defend their way of life.

Major changes with which local peoples in the Ethiopian Southwest have to deal since the past decade are the insertion of the new large-scale agrarian plantations on expropriated land, the damming of the Omo, irrigation schemes, coerced socioeconomic change (away from pastoralism), and mandatory villagization. A slow economic disempowerment of the local people is in progress, as their agrarian activities—such as river-bank cultivation, crop rotation, and livestock herding—are discouraged and territorially narrowed down. Different conceptions and definitions of 'nature,' 'environment,' and 'resources' compete, so as to change the *meaning* of local livelihoods and landscapes.

Some aspects of these much promising economic developmental schemes of the state—the Gibe-3 river dam, sugar plantations and factories, irrigation for large commercial farms, and settlements of workers imported from elsewhere—must therefore be seen from the other side: that of the local peoples forced to deal with and adapt to them. The sugar plantations of the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation (a state monopoly) are well described already (e.g., Keeley et al. 2013; Dessalegn 2014; Asnake and Fana 2012; Tewolde and Fana 2014; Fana 2015; Kamski 2016a, b). These schemes and commercial plantations, although not realized on the grand scale originally planned,¹³ are facts, and impact thoroughly on local conditions and landscapes (see Fig. 6.1). The assorted social, and human rights consequences are also significant,



Fig. 6.1 Lush traditional sorghum and maize fields of Suri near a village, 1992. A sight no longer seen in 2017. Note trees left standing across and near the fields

and probably will have a negative impact on long-term growth, prospects of ‘inclusive’ human development, sustainability, and durability. Environmental preservation and resilience are not guaranteed.¹⁴ Suri informants have frequently complained about the fact of ‘not being heard,’ being seen as ‘superfluous,’ and having to conform to imposed livelihood and cultural changes so as to become ‘modern.’ They are painfully aware as well that their space is literally constrained: ‘We have nowhere to go’, they say, due to the presence not only of the state projects on their territory but also to gradually expanding neighboring groups that inhibit movement (e.g., of herds, or to new cultivation sites) and in-migration. The paradox is that the Suri have their own political-administrative district (‘Surma *woreda*’), but this unit is powerless to act in the interests of the Suri community and cannot help them in maintaining their rights to land and decision-making. There is allegedly also endemic corruption, which draws in Suri members of the *woreda* council.

The new economic dynamics of Ethiopia is much lauded in global economic discourse and in donor country and World Bank development assistance circles, but is informed by unbalanced macroeconomic views, a neglect of the role of local economic systems in place (cf. Hallman and Olivera 2015 for a South American case study), and an absence of monitoring or evaluation by donor funders. This top-down and supply side-driven ‘developmental state’ approach is still little studied as it is unfolding ‘on the ground,’ at the local level; this is not really in the purview of donor countries and global institutions.¹⁵

Suri Livelihoods and Environment Use

The environment of most local people in the Ethiopian Southwest, including the Suri and Nyangatom, is dominated by transhumant agropastoralist livelihoods, but there is also river-bank cultivation, gold panning, and some hunting-gathering.

Among Dizi and Tishana Me'en people (northwest of the Omo), who live in the hills, there is a mixed agrarian economy, based on shifting cultivation, honey production, and gathering, with small-scale domestic livestock keeping (Me'en), or among the Dizi sedentary grain, *enset* and tuber cultivation, with occasional gold panning. Me'en have developed cash crops like coffee and sesame in recent years. Exchange and local market relations connect the groups, but with cattle raiding, theft, and clashes also occurring.

In the Suri areas (the lowland savannas and the foothills), we find a landscape with numerous cattle tracks, water points, ritual places, hunting-gathering domains and cattle camps, and more permanent village sites in the low hills. The tree- and species-rich savannah is (was) maintained due to Suri frequently moving cattle to prevent overgrazing, and their not totally uprooting vegetation and trees when preparing cultivation sites; they cut them only partially, to allow regeneration. In fact, the specific park-like landscape was created and maintained by Suri via periodic controlled grass burning, transhumant grazing, and the frequent moving of settlements and fields.

There was a coexistence with wildlife: Hunting was done since the early nineteenth century in the current Omo National Park area, but

(until recently) not in predatory fashion. It was a system of hunting not imbued with cosmological or supernatural ideas about the ‘harmony’ of natural species, but more based on a pragmatic attitude, defined by long-term interest.¹⁶ The local landscape is an integrated system of various types of land use and cultural use: not monotonous, but varied, interlocked, and filled with ‘meanings and memories.’ It is dotted with ritual and other culturally significant places¹⁷ that make it ‘home’ (Many of them still unexplored among the Suri, and partially taken over and now inaccessible after occupation by the neighboring Nyangatom people).

The Suri area therefore being a typical agropastoralist livelihood zone, the people always relied on a smart *combination* of cultivation, transhumant livestock herding, and hunting-gathering. The lowland area (meaning in Ethiopia: below ca. 1000 m.) is overall food secure.¹⁸ Cultivation is rain-fed (although at the Omo River a few Suri, imitating Mela or Mursi, also did flood-retreat cultivation (dependent on annual flooding bringing fertile silt deposits). Drought is rare, and varieties of sorghum used are attuned to the rain and soil characteristics of the fields (see Fig. 6.1). Maize also yielded relatively good harvests.

Most Suri households (among all three subgroups, Chai, Tirmaga, and Baale) have cattle in low-lying areas and are transhumant. Previous pasture areas in South Sudan were lost in the course of the twentieth century due to ethnic group conflict, enhanced after the 1980s by the spread of semi-automatic weapons among all groups, leading to an intensification of raiding and many hundreds of casualties over the past quarter century. Sharing of historical pastures areas of Nyangatom and Suri has steeply declined. Only in recent years, there is some contact again between the two groups (and with the Toposa in South Sudan) about asking permission to graze cattle in the respective border areas. Food insecurity when it occurs is due to the effects of livestock raiding—leading to serious decrease of milk (products) and cattle blood available for consumption as well as to wealth loss (having a cascade effect: less trade of cattle or goats for food, delay of marriage, and decline of payments).

For the long rainy season, starting in ca. February, Suri households plant sorghum, maize, and beans in the fields, and in the gardens around the house cabbage, spices, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, and some cassava. The gardens are the full responsibility of the women, but they also take a great role in the maintenance and weeding of the larger fields for staple crops. While the Suri economy is (was) largely self-sufficient in food due to a solid cultivation basis and products from livestock (meat, milk, blood; cf. Abbink 2017a), they also sell cattle and goats in local markets for cash, if need be. Their main cash income in the last 25 years, however, has been from the sale of alluvial gold, which they pan in the many streams in the area.

The main markets for the Suri zone are in the small towns of Jeba and Maji, as well as the frontier town of Dima (although insecurity there is high). Town traders also buy livestock and gold in a kind of 'contract' arrangement, i.e., often before it reaches the physical market. Suri buy additional food supplies, canisters, razor blades, soap, and alcoholic drinks (*araqé*).¹⁹ They tend to avoid selling their cattle, in order to maintain their herd sizes. They usually only sell adult male animals (older bulls, oxen), never cows or heifers. Prices for all products can fluctuate significantly due to all kinds of factors, including insecurity. In May–June, just before the main harvest, there is a 'lean' period, when food is in short supply. At this time, households tend to purchase additional food with income from the sale of livestock, and also gather more wild food items occurs (seeds, nuts, and fruits). This 'gathering' component of the local economy is often seen as a sign of a 'primitive economy' by state officials and development agents, but the products are nutritious and plentiful and an integral part of the Suri diet.

Next to population growth, climatic variability and spatial competition as underlying causes, brief lapses of food insecurity were produced by group conflict and by occasional livestock diseases (e.g., rinderpest, pasteuriosis, blackleg, contagious bovine pleuropneumonia, and foot and mouth disease). Pasteuriosis occurs particularly in October–December and blackleg during the rainy season (cf. FEWS-Net report, *ibid.*). While Suri cattle overall are healthy, households could obtain drugs if needed either from occasional government veterinary service in Kibish (the main town of Surma district), via a Protestant–Evangelical

mission organization located in Tulgit town, and sometimes on the black market, from pastoralist traders in South Sudan.

The Suri traditionally diversified their productive activities, geared to environmental possibilities and to mobility of livestock as well as cultivation sites (changed after a certain number of years), and they make low-intensity but optimal use of the natural conditions, with simple technology. Mobility of herds, following the best available feed sources, is a *production strategy*, not a ‘coping strategy’ to deal with ‘problems’ (cf. Krätli et al. 2013, 44).

Ecology, Space, and Place

It can be noted that the cultural ecology of the Suri in particular and related peoples reveals an adaptive system of agropastoralism geared to the three pillars of livestock rearing, field rotation agriculture, and hunting-gathering. Gold sales and petty trade are activities that have become an essential addition to their economy. But since a decade or so the gold trade, in which they were the pioneers in their own area, is threatened by the influx of all kinds of non-Suri newcomers, mostly highland Ethiopians, who aggressively compete and push out the Suri from their traditional places, with the help of armed forces and police.²⁰ This appears to be another phase in the gradual disempowerment of the Suri: next to the pressure to reduce their herds (and thereby their capital) and to give up their agricultural fields for small plots near newly villagized locations, also their chief cash source (gold) is being taken from them. Since 2012, dozens more killings and cases of robbery of Suri gold miners have occurred. In addition, the way the highlanders do gold mining is much more damaging to the environment, as they use mercury (and sometimes arsenic) to ‘purify’ and separate the gold from rock and stone. They also dig deep holes all over the area, in contrast to the Suri, who do mostly surface mining and leave the landscape more intact. During 2017, it also seemed that foreign investors would be allowed to mechanically mine Suri gold places in the south, undoubtedly set to contribute to a further deterioration of the environment, and taking away resources from the Suri economy.

The Suri's evolved local livelihoods were imbued with cultural knowledge that represented experience-based strategies to survive, diversify risks, and adapt to changes. These are threatened now due to the livelihood transformations imposed upon them. With neighboring peoples, there is a dimension of competition and conflict which has become more serious since the 1980s due to one or two extreme droughts (e.g., in 1984–1985), group conflict (impact of the South Sudan civil war since the early 1980s), emerging climate variability, population growth on all fronts, and growing state interference. The latter has not diminished the conflict potential, probably the contrary.

Definitions of culturally and economically meaningful 'space' and 'place' as perceived by ethnic groups are vital in this area, as they reflect access claims to land, water, and pasture, symbolic constitution of 'homeland,' and economic range (e.g., extent of territory or pastures). The elements have a direct environmental dimension. The ethnology of 'space' and 'place' has been developing since ca. two decades at least (see the book by Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003), and has predominantly focused on the changing cultural meanings and interpretations of these two concepts as locally embedded and articulated. In the case of the Suri and other peoples in the Ethiopian Southwest, it is striking to see how the state politics entering the region has undermined local conceptions and practices regarding space and place, subverting local cultural narratives, and social cohesion.

Under the post-1991 ethno-federal state, the Suri were assigned their own administrative unit: the 'Surma *woreda*' within the Bench-Maji Zone. That is, their 'identity' is officially recognized and laid down via territorial anchoring. Without such an anchoring, no group in today's Ethiopia has a chance to be recognized²¹ or—in the long run—to survive. So there is a specific 'Suri territory,' although in the Suri mind, their territory is wider than that: extending to all areas where cattle can find grazing and water, and historically much beyond of what it is now. The obvious problem is that 'Suri territory' is now contested by the federal state, which wants 'the resources.' It 'nationalizes' the environment and the land, which is constitutionally defined as state property. The idea of all land as 'public,' i.e. state owned, has led to the notion among state planners and administrators that the

environment and its ‘resources’ do not have to be factored in as ‘costs’: They are freely available. It is a familiar story and applies of course also to other parts of the Omo Valley, with the Nyangatom (south of the Suri), the Mursi, the Mela, and Chirim (Me’en) people all in danger of being pushed out or challenged by expanding sugar plantations and commercial farms (cf. Avery 2012: 59, 2014; Fong 2015; Kamski 2016a; Wagstaff 2015). The Surma *woreda* authorities (with some Suri officials, but mostly outsiders placed there by the ruling party) have no say over what is happening in their district and cannot prevent or modify plans imposed by the Regional or the Federal Government. The latter’s approach thus also subverts the political formula of ‘ethnic federalism.’

For Suri, the environment is a *cultural* landscape, the product of interactive engagement over centuries. Land and nature are seen as an open space or ‘resource’ to be shared for all, but people need to respect and ‘maintain’ it. There is land classification and use planning, and no idea of ‘free riding’ of humans on nature. Suri, like the Mursi (Olisarali and LaTosky 2015), make land use decisions for the collective, decided and confirmed in public debate assemblies of adult males as well as in more detail within the five or six cooperative herding units (*buran*), that all have a certain territorial range. Their classification of land use is into roughly four kinds: (a) lowland plains, space for livestock grazing and moving/exploring (‘open space,’ no real limits), with cattle camps, and basically forbidden for married women, (b) cultivation areas, nearer to villages, and horticulture plots (women’s domain) in the villages, (c) areas of bush and forest for gathering and hunting, and (d) ritual and public spaces, such as burial sites for ritual leaders (*komoru*); initiation sites for age sets and a new *komoru*; public debate sites). Suri used to plan and decide on their land use in a long-term, ‘interactive’ perspective—where to make new fields for what, where to go for herding, which forest/bush area to leave alone, etc.

Although these local societies like Suri, Nyangatom, Me’en, or Dizi were not necessarily ‘well-integrated societies’ marked by ecologically responsible interaction with the environment, there was no tendency to exhaustive over-exploitation of the ‘natural resources,’ also because the technological means and the economic inequality structures to allow or

fuel this were not there. Over-exploitation usually started (in recent decades) due to external stimuli, population growth, and imposed territorial restrictions (Fig. 6.2).

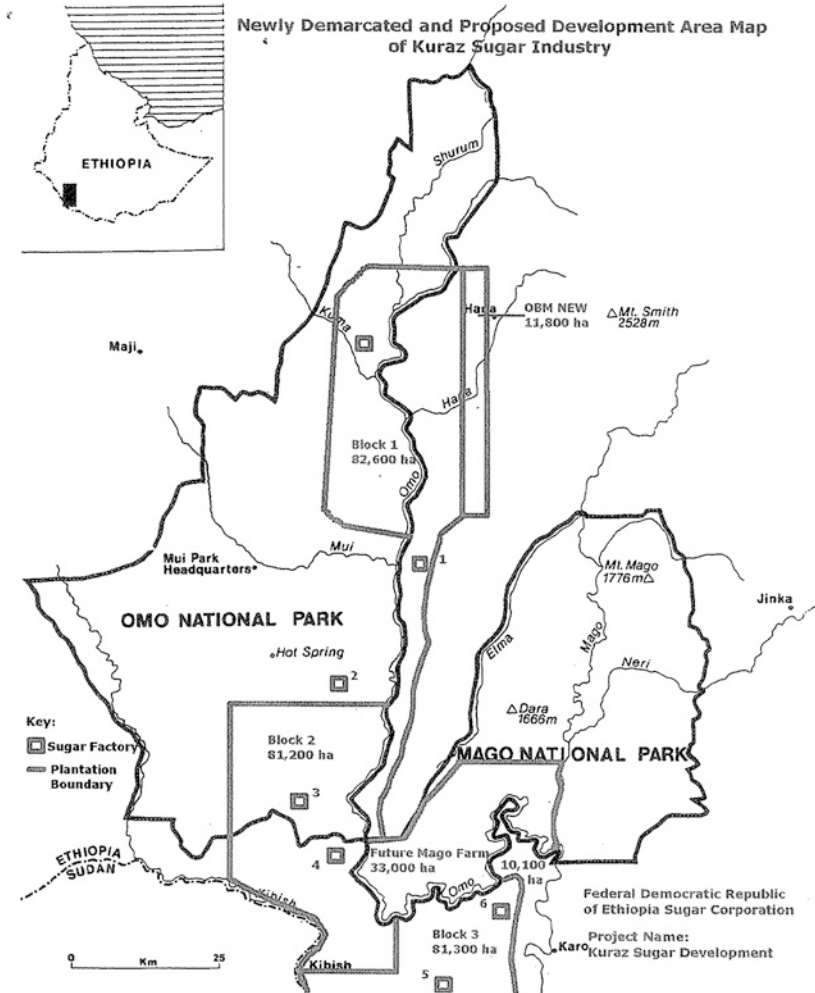


Fig. 6.2 Plan of the sugar plantation surfaces in the Lower Omo basin (Source <https://www.survivalinternational.nl/nieuws/7865>, from an official Ethiopian project document, 2011)

State Development Views and Plans

Today, critical issues of sustainability, access, profit, and future use of the land and its resources are predominant among all groups, as space is getting limited, populations increase (notably among Me'en), and the new state economic projects now compete with the locals and their resource use. Local land-use access and 'planning' thus get increasingly difficult. The state interventions are imposed on top of the local subsistence economies and are non-negotiated, interfering with cultural–ecological practices in place. Residents, notably Suri, compare the indifferent and often abusive policy of the state (cf. HRW 2012; Oakland Institute 2013) toward local inhabitants with its aggressive intervention in the local physical environment—damming the river and holding up the water, slashing all vegetation, roads crossing the area and the fields, construction of moats around plantations—they see parallels.

The Omo Valley—like a few other 'frontier regions,' like Gambella (cf. Seyoum 2015 or Benishangul-Gumuz, cf. Tsegaye 2016)—is thus an area in flux: infrastructure building, environmental overhaul, agrarian industrialization, and population movements. For instance, in the Kuraz sugar plantation plans (Kamski 2016a, b), the settlement of an imported labor force of ca. 400,000 people from other parts of the country was foreseen (among them, resettled Konso). This would lead to new 'urban centers,' without much connection to the hinterland, and friction with local groups. While these initial figures have been much lowered in recent years, the tensions are already there. Domination and displacement of local people, who are seen as having no economies of scale, no food security and no 'skills', are proceeding.

The state political and economic expansion started in full force after the Ethiopian leadership (the late PM Meles Zenawi 2011) decided to tackle the perceived 'developmental deficit' of rural Ethiopia in a radical way. The plans did not lack vision and ambition—probably there was too much of it. Part of the first (2010) 'Growth and Transformation Plan'²² was a major boost of the energy production infrastructure and agrarian export production via investments in hydro-dams, roads, and large-scale mono-crop plantations on leased land in 'empty' or 'under-used'

areas. Meles's vision of the agropastoralist peoples was outlined in his controversial speech of 2011 (Meles 2011).

The state presence—government administration—in the towns is established, in addition to the investment projects mentioned above, and the extraction of resources is on the rise (coffee and sesame, minerals, wood, and gold). Local people struggle against the effects of this alternative land use and livelihood competition, but are met with refusal and often arrest. No reasonable, open debate, let alone criticism of the plans, is tolerated.

One stated aim of the massive agrarian investment schemes started since 2010 was to 'bring development and civilization' to the Southern peoples. It was apparently envisaged (cp. PM Meles's speech of 2011, cited above) that they would be laborers, technicians, etc. on the plantations, and that 'technology transfer' and the like would benefit local agriculture. This has not happened. At the most (so far, in late 2017), some members of the local ethnic groups (Suri, Nyangatom, Mursi, Mela) were employed as guards or drivers, e.g., at the Salamago plantation east across the Omo. Their salaries were rather high according to local standards, but the work is often temporary and no one was trained for higher functions, not even the few locals who received a BA degree in accounting or in other economic-administrative skills, and very few gained a position of influence. On the plantations, the tensions between members of different ethnic groups are high. There is much robbery and killing of people for money, and people also disappear.

A key issue is that the state interventions do *not* have the aim to strengthen local food security, but primarily to generate 'export value' (energy via the Gibe-3 dam, cash for the state via the sale of sugar, cotton, biofuels, etc., from irrigated fields). In fact, local systems of food production are undermined.²³

A closer look at the Ethiopian state's view shows that, as many other 'developmental states,' it projects a view of the environment or the natural conditions, as an 'enemy' to be conquered, in a classic nineteenth-century Western sense. It has to be 'overcome,' to be dominated and exploited. The rhetoric of Ethiopia's GTPs I and II is full of terms reflecting this, and the frame of thinking is handed down along the various administrative levels, whose officials have to conform to it and are judged on the 'targets' that are set.

State agents often show a lack of valuation of ecological conditions as ‘production factors’ with certain costs. That is, there is serious ‘underpricing,’ most clearly seen in the case of the construction of the massive sugar plantations. It fits in this approach that local people’s identity and territory are to be ‘decoupled’ in the development plans and even by legal means: All land is state property and no intrinsic or symbolic bonds are recognized by the government between peoples and their eco-habitats. Neither have proper geo-ecological feasibility studies or impact assessments been made; and if there are, they are not accessible. Local people do not really have a voice, and there is no educated elite to plead their cause.

The Suri, in so far as they have explicitly conceptualized their relation to the environment, connect to their natural physical conditions in a more accommodative, pragmatic, and adaptive way, that takes a longer-term view of mutual dependency: They know they have to maintain it. But, as noted above, this does not automatically mean that they are ‘in balance with the environment’ or see themselves as ‘custodians’ of nature. They have overgrazing in places and sometimes excessively hunt in certain areas. Still, they do not share the state views (in the dam and plantation areas) that land and nature are like a ‘free resource’ to be exploited without limits.

Specifically, the state’s land use ventures are far-reaching and have significant environmental effects, the consequences of which are not yet entirely clear. First and foremost to consider is the impact of sugarcane plantations and their expanding irrigation demands. Ca. 175,000 ha. of sugarcane plantation was foreseen in the 2010 plans (Avery 2012, vol. 1, 12f., 52).²⁴ As of late 2017, huge plantations are in place on the east bank of the Omo, on land of the Kwegu, and the Mela and Chirim (both Me’en groups), eventually to cover 82,600 ha.,²⁵ expanding south to the Mursi area. These people lost virtually all their land and resources access, and many of their cattle (due to lack of pasture or access to the Omo River). The riparian forest was destroyed over dozens of kilometers along the river, and with it, natural species, wildlife, food and ethno-medicinal plants, and places to hang beehives or as dry season pasture and shade for livestock. River-bank cultivation—a key food security element—was lost.

The effects already reached the Omo delta as well. The Nyangatom and Dassanech reportedly suffer from the cessation of the annual floods and the drying out of the area due to closure of the Gibe-3 dam and the receding water levels of Lake Turkana (cf. Carr 2017 for an analysis). As of late 2017, the lake had already dropped 1.5 m (Source: HRW 2017). In general, the rapid decline of forests, added to that in other areas of Ethiopia, contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, and this is not compensated by the sugarcane field greenery.²⁶

Since 2016, sugarcane plantation construction has also started on the west bank of the river, down from the Sai mountain, right in lowland Suri territory, near Udumt village (Suri). It will reach down to the Dirga hills area, which will be just outside the plantation area.²⁷ In these Sai plains ca. 2000 Chai Suri live with their herds, grazing in the plains below Sai, and others from the west also come to graze cattle. Their pastures and their access to the Omo are now being disturbed. The Mela scenario of environmental decline and social upheaval (see Buffavand 2016, 2017) is likely to be repeated, as livelihoods and food security are threatened.

What are the environmental effects of sugarcane plantations?²⁸ As in the Mela area, in the Suri and Nyangatom areas west of the Omo—eventually to cover a staggering 81,300 ha.—their construction is leading to natural habitat clearance, with few local species of trees and bushes retained. A dramatic reduction of biodiversity and of food plant availability for gathering and ethno-medicinal purposes likely occurs. This is even apart from the loss of fields and pastures. The associated irrigation of the sugarcane fields requires lots of water, also taken from the Omo river. This will likely even lead to an overuse of water and to salinization. There is also a danger of soil erosion due to the intensive, yearly cultivation of one crop. Especially in this area, soil fertility is uneven (as in many parts of Africa, see IFAD-Montpellier Panel 2014) and prone to decline. Substantial irrigation and fertilizer addition will be needed year in, year out, and the risk is soil quality loss with long-term effects, especially in the absence of other vegetation. Also, the discharge of sugar mill effluents will be negative and is already making its effects felt in the Block I plantation areas in Mela territory (Salamago *woreda*). In principle, the residue of harvested cane could be collected and fed to

livestock of the neighboring pastoralists, but this is not done.²⁹ Instead, the sugar plantation authorities decided to use it for additional energy generation. Neither the wood from the thousands of trees cut on the plantation sites could be used by local people. The negative effects of intensive use of chemicals, pesticides, and runoff pollution that have been reported of most large-scale plantations can also be expected in the sugarcane area. They have already been noted on the east bank of the Omo (Kamski 2016b, 6), e.g., among the Mela people.

The restrictions on the use of space—less transhumance areas for herds—leads to pastoralists being forced into smaller areas, where overgrazing takes place. Some of the Suri near Sai mountain west of the Omo have for this reason even moved across the Omo. Furthermore, despite promises that water would be provided to the new agrarian plots near ‘resettlement villages,’ according to reports from local informants (2016–2017), the irrigation channels from the (lowered) Omo river are withholding water from grazing areas and fields.

There is some irony in that the massive investments and clearing of natural forest and habitat and the projected mass settlement of import-Ethiopians from densely settled north-central areas will lead to rapid environmental decline and erosion, features that are now recognized in northern Ethiopia and are eliciting counter-measures (cf. Abbink 2017b). It seems that in the ‘empty’ Ethiopian Southwest first such development-induced erosion and soil degradation processes will be allowed to occur, before any ‘mitigation measures’ will be considered.³⁰

Other agrarian investments also proceed, next to the state sugar plantations, and will become more numerous. In the heartland of the Suri area west of the Omo, there was already a foreboding of things to come with the construction of a 31,000 ha. plantation in Koka locality, northwest of the town of Maji after 2010.³¹ Although it was only operational from 2010 to 2014, run by a Malaysian company that had leased the land, it led to massive ‘clearing,’ huge enclosure, and cutting off access to pasture or to the waters of the Koka river for Suri herders. The Koka plantation was not successful due to a host of problems (cf. Wagstaff 2015, 19–20; Oakland Institute 2014a): insufficient preparatory field studies were done by the company, the crop choice

(sesame, palm oil, mushrooms, and rubber) was over-ambitious, there was lack of capacity and resources, operational costs were very high, and there were some security problems. Local Suri herders and cultivators were not consulted and did not accept the confiscation of their dry-season grazing land and transhumance routes. There were repeated skirmishes with the guards, whereby people were killed. Also, the tensions between Dizi people (supporting the plantation) and Suri increased, allegedly due to issues of tax collection from the Malaysian company: Dizi demanded any company tax be paid to Dizi *woredas* (Bero or Maji), and Suri were demanding that they should also profit.³²

The Koka plantation was partly on Dizi and on Surma *woreda* lands. The plantation was guarded by Ethiopian security personnel, and a huge moat was constructed in the fashion of a medieval castle to keep Suri and others out. Cattle would fall into the ditches, leading to anger among Suri owners. Frequently Suri people invaded the plantation, e.g., to take maize. While the plantation was abandoned in late 2014, the land was partly retaken by Suri, building several cattle camps there. But it was then scheduled to be given to other investors, again without consultation with the local Suri resource users, and additional armed units arrived to protect the area. In 2017, a number of Ethiopian investors from outside the area were promised the land, and they started new plantations.

A significant number of violent incidents occurred in the last decade, partly due to the plantations generating resentment and being 'militarized,' and also due to the ongoing, ill-managed ethnic group tensions on the presumed 'benefits' and the controversies on land use and access. The growing insecurity and chaos in local economic relations also produced more banditry in the area. First, the Suri were seen as the exclusive perpetrators, ambushing Dizi, and Me'en and villagers. They were often involved, but gradually it appeared that more and more Dizi and highlanders were also active, often masquerading as 'Suri' and even going so far as to dress like Suri and apply white paint to their faces. The local authorities of the Bench-Maji Zone (the unit where the Dizi and Surma *woredas* are located) have had some success in recent years to curb this violence by organizing peace meetings and amnesty sessions. At the same time, the authorities try to disarm all local people, especially the Suri.

In the background of the half-hearted state efforts and promises on ‘development’ to local peoples is the wish to ultimately *eliminate* transhumant pastoralism and have all the people settle—the familiar old cultural scheme based on mistaken perceptions, if not disdain, of small-holder farming and agropastoral economic strategies, this despite the ‘constitutionally guaranteed’ right of pastoralist peoples to their livelihoods.³³ Suri informants (2015–2017) mentioned the repeated exhortations of local administrators—often issued with threats—that they had to (re)settle, reduce herds and cultivate maize (as well as ‘give up bad customs’). Ideas from the Suri themselves routinely neglected, and those who protested were arrested. There is even no thinking among state officials about rangeland development for cattle-herding.

Effects of State ‘Landscape Reconstruction’ on Local Peoples: More on the Suri Example

Suri livestock herding, their core activity, is relegated to a smaller territory, and there is pressure to reduce animal numbers. They are forced to limit transhumance, leading to mounting resource pressure. Data from c. 22 Suri households that were followed for over more than a decade show that they not only all lost animals to raiding by Nyangatom and Toposa but also faced greater problems in finding reliable pasture and water for the animals in general. Counter-raiding did not compensate for the losses, and it incurs police/army action. Security forces rarely if at all assist the Suri in self-defense or in recuperating cattle raided by Toposa. The pressure on Suri to congregate in the state-designated ‘resettlement villages’—a movement not devoid of coercion (cf. Wagstaff 2015)—has the consequence that herd mobility is reduced, as cattle cannot be kept near the villages. They continue to herd them in the plains, but the space is shrinking; they no more have ‘buffer zones.’ There is movement toward border areas near Nyangatom and Toposa, but with permanent risk. The movement up north (to the Akobo River valley), necessary despite the lesser quality of the pasture, was thwarted by the closure of the area covered by the huge Koka plantation (see above). So what are the main effects?

- Restrictions on livestock herding and losses incurred by raiding mean impoverishment. The raiding in the area has not diminished in the wake of the development schemes but continues, and animals are rarely recovered by local police or armed forces. There are tragic stories of people brought to poverty in one day. In 2016, one of the Suri *komorus* (ritual leader) said in a soft, low voice: ‘All our animals were taken, all. We have been made poor. Nothing is left.’
- Suri seriously resent the ‘settlement programme’ (Amharic: *sāfāra program*) of the government obliging them to sedentarize and congregate in limited spaces and finding neither room for the livestock herds, nor for proper cultivation plots. The type of housing—tin-roofed square structures of bad quality—are unpopular, and people do not understand why the new, prescribed village sites are not built near a water source, like traditional Suri villages are.³⁴ They also resent the patronizing efforts to ‘teach them how to do agriculture,’ while they are excellent cultivators already, both of food staples (sorghum, maize) and horticultural crops. They also see dangers of over-exploitation of the limited territory. There are complaints about the density, the cutting down of shade trees and the rapid exhaustion of the small fields for cultivation. Decisions as to plant what and where by Suri are subverted, leading to confusion and restriction of production. This shows that the ‘villagization programme’ has not been thought over properly regarding its impact on the immediate environment. In addition to the villagization and plantation outlays, the area is crisscrossed by road-building projects, both done for security reasons (to allow army access) as well as facilitate external investors moving in. Suri fields and pasture routes are crossed by these roads, which tear up the landscape and are resented.
- Suri persistently comment on the decline of variety and numbers of natural species (vegetation, wildlife, food plants and medicinal resources, and even fish in the Kibish and Omo rivers), especially in areas close to the sugar plantations and other large-scale agrarian projects. They note that wild plants they use for one of their main dishes are decreasing and also that wildlife is ‘pulling out’ or disappearing.³⁵ At the same time, they abandon restrictions on hunting; when outsiders show a demand for ivory and other wildlife products like

leopard skins, they increase hunting to sell to them.³⁶ This is done in response to the decline in other livelihood domains and changes the Suri attitude toward the environment.

- There are also observations made by local people of the increase of invasive species like *Parthenium hysterophorus*, *Prosopis juliflora*, and others (cf. Berhanu and Nejjib 2016 on the current situation), which have done such enormous damage in the Afar pastoralist area in northeast Ethiopia (cf. Lisanework et al. 2010; Rettberg and Müller-Mahn 2012). These disastrous weeds are already invading Nyangatom areas and will likely spread in the wake of the construction of the sugar plantations. In the literature, it has been noted that the heavy construction equipment (bulldozers) is often spreading the seeds of such plants.
- There is also more movement of dispossessed Suri people who lost land and pasture or cattle and search for places of safety. Some have lost large numbers of cattle due to raiding and moved to new areas to try and recover via cultivation and goat herding in border zones, and to avoid the obligatory ‘settlement areas.’ But resource pressure is augmenting, because space is literally shrinking. In the past 5–7 years, Suri moved closer to the southern end of Dizi territory, the Kolu hills, due to being pressurized by Nyangatom and Toposa. Suri settlements remain unstable due to the security threats. Displacement and land loss is a general problem in the Lower Omo Valley project area and has also affected the Mela, Kwegu, Kara, and Mursi people east of the Omo, as well as the northern Me’en, e.g., near the village of Biftu, west of Mizan town.³⁷
- Alternative futures are being planned: Local people including Suri are to be employed on plantations as wage laborers, and to be given 0.25–0.5 ha. plots of land for subsistence cultivation near their designated ‘villagization’ area. Suri—like the Mela across the Omo (cf. Buffavand 2017)—find this preposterous and reject it; it interferes with their economic decision-making, and they say that the area around such villages has too little cropland and is soon depleted of wood and other resources (see above). The experience so far with the few existing new villages bears this out. Some Suri state that it is unjust to be made ‘unemployed’—by denying them their herding

lifestyle and cattle wealth and trying to limit their cultivation practices—so as to be forced to be laborers on a plantation. They think also that the restriction of mobility and means is sub-optimal use of the environment and not conducive to well-being. Several Suri have indeed started to work on the plantations, e.g., the one in Salamago, east of the Omo. This was often due to their having lost all their cattle in raids. The plantation work, however, is dangerous and is done in bad circumstances; the tensions between members of different ethnic groups are high, and there are much robbery and killing of people for money, and people also disappear.

- A survey of Suri households³⁸ in Surma *woreda* indicates that overall food security, especially in areas of partial villagization, has declined, as has crop and diet variety. This may be due to the prohibition to cultivate freely and the pressure to decrease livestock herds. The ‘free supply’ of maize, as a premium to get people to settle, did not prevent this.
- A general feature of the developmental offensive in the Lower Omo Valley is the belittling of local peoples: They are to follow orders and have no say in implementation or in offering alternatives adapted to local conditions. Many sources have mentioned gross abuse of locals who protest or even dare to ask questions on what is happening. Local young spokesmen or emerging leaders were frequently arrested and killed.³⁹ This issue, however, needs more research.

The state sees the southwest as an anomalous political space, still without proper authority or leadership, and as a domain or territory yet outside ‘the law.’ State actions and territorial rooting via administration, police posts, and land schemes *establish* its presence and produce locality for the state, so to speak. In the process, which shows obvious parallels with historical cases of state-making elsewhere, local people are subjugated or ‘disciplined’ in a new order—but so far this did not give them active citizenship rights (cf. also ILO 1991). As noted above, the state authority claims to space and environmental ‘resources’ has led to relegation of locals to second-class status and to exclusivist practices that break the existing practices of environmental management.

The political ecology of development and environmental exploitation as initiated by the Ethiopian state since ca. 2010 has thus clearly changed the ethno-landscapes and (implicit) ecological management rules of local peoples in the Omo Valley. These eco-scapes are being fragmented and divided into unconnected parts and reduced in viability and diversity. The water and vegetation systems of the Omo Basin are disrupted, and this impacts on overall fauna and flora. Consequences across the board have not been favorable. While population pressure and climate change are also marching on in the Lower Omo Valley, they do not in and by themselves produce environmental problems and local food insecurity. The large-scale agrarian plantation economy set up in the area, coupled with (re)settlement policy, leasing out land to numerous outsider-investors, etc., is contributing to instability, as it is not sufficiently geared to environmental conditions and political consensus. Sustainability and local acceptance would demand contextual planning, better choice of suitable crops, densities, and building on proven local economies, like already existing staple crop production and river-bank flood-retreat cultivation (which was much more productive than the current irrigated agriculture on plots near the new villages).

Conclusions

Suri are among several peoples in Southwest Ethiopia facing environmental problems as a result of state landscape reconstruction, forced livelihood changes and resettlement, and partly due to longer-term climatic changes. State misconceptions on massive-scale agrarian development, free riding on nature, and non-negotiated resource extraction enhance the problems, undermining the ecological resilience of the Lower Omo River basin. The changes are quite far-reaching and can best be studied via their impact on local peoples that have evolved and adapted in the area for hundreds of years. Many of them, notably the Kwegu,⁴⁰ Nyangatom (Carr 2017, 145f), Mela (Buffavand 2016; Stevenson and Buffavand 2018); and Suri,

are ‘losing the plot’ in a double sense: Literally, their pastures and cultivation plots and the freedom to clear them and exploit them where they want, and the sociocultural plot, due to mounting fragmentation and disarray in their societies—for the Suri, partly internally (Abbink 1998) and partly externally generated (Abbink 2009a, b, 2017a).

The state developmental ventures in the Lower Omo Valley—still informed by a model of post-Communist command-economy governance—have thus not significantly contributed to well-being and development (in its multidimensional meaning) but instead to more environmental assault and to more human misery. The number of people displaced, killed, injured, and traumatized in the past two decades is remarkable; in fact unprecedented. Suri lives are not positively impacted in either a social or a material way and show no good answers to cope with the problems. Only a few younger people that are inserted into the national education system and have found jobs and other benefits outside the agropastoral economy see advantages: A minority that is somewhat estranged from its own community and also is reputed to have gotten itself deeply involved in corruption (notably in the Surma *woreda*). They also keep a foothold in the pastoral economy, investing in animals. Overall, the Suri agropastoral way of life is thus under siege: Their lands—as those of the neighboring ‘indigenous’ groups in the Omo Valley Basin—are wanted by outsiders and their livelihoods are threatened. A convenient political and sociocultural labelling of these local groups as ‘backward’ and ‘having nothing to contribute to the national economy’ is exercised, buttressing the state’s appropriation of lands and economies.

The process of change breaks the bonds of sustainable resource use that were predominantly in place among local ethnic groups (despite the occasional crises). The neglect or misunderstanding of local views and cultural values attached to space and place as enacted by populations in the Omo Valley and that define ‘environment,’ livelihood ‘resources’ and ‘home,’ tends to exclude them from (a) productive involvement in developmental ventures, (b) recognition as capable cultivators, and (c) citizenship rights; and finally, is detrimental

to the local ecological system: Because the environment is seen as an ‘adversary’ to control, not a sphere to manage and live in. Suri had meaningful cultural templates to guide their interaction with the environment that helped them adapt and survive so far. These are denied relevance by state agents and are under pressure, e.g., in state schools, religious change (missionary groups) and political indoctrination. Still, it is likely that these cultural factors remain of influence and will resurface. As M. Sahlins has said, ‘culture’ is not a disappearing object (2000), and the Suri, who remain remarkably attached to their land, will likely try to ‘encompass’ the emerging new state order ‘within their own cosmos’ (cp. Sahlins 2000, 202).

The socioeconomic processes in the Lower Omo Valley so far, engendered by the Ethiopian state and its agents, including the investors and sugar company ventures, have shown severe political and ecological problems, reflecting those elsewhere in Ethiopia and the Horn. The environmental issues (including those directly related to the Gibe-3 dam, not treated in-depth here) are underestimated and are affecting local economic and societal resilience (cf. Turton 2012). Nothing was learned by the state from experiences like the Afar country debacle in the 1970s–1980s (cp. Behnke and Kerven 2013; Carr 2017, 27). The neglect of local adaptive systems in place, notably agropastoralism, and the lack of space accorded to them to *operate*, is dramatic, and enhances vulnerability on a wider scale. Next to the declining environmental conditions, the constant conflicts in the Ethiopian Southwest—with many people killed and injured—and the negligible growth of local productivity, incomes and well-being so far, may show that government policies are worrying and economically not working well. They do not deliver but make things worse and are very costly.⁴¹

There is a need for a context-sensitive *agro-ecosystems approach* to rural development and food security provision, as well as a new chapter in accountability and in ‘stakeholder’ involvement in more democratic and gradual processes of developing the local economies on the basis of *what is already there*. The so-called traditional knowledge—or rather, the ‘experiential local knowledge’ of people that lived in the place for

centuries—has adaptive value and needs to be re-evaluated and *integrated* into the agrarian modernization drive (Giles 2005b). This ecosystems knowledge can even be recognized in its financial value, so far just bypassed by governments (cf. Giles 2005a). Indigenous knowledge is certainly not all scientifically acceptable, but it neither is backward or useless (cf. Hendry 2014; Amborn 2012; Pardo and Macía 2015). Livelihood complexes in place (cf. Getachew 2014 on the Gedeo in South-central Ethiopia) can be seen as *biocultural heritage traditions*, rooted in specific ecologies, and functional (IIED 2014). They are multidimensional and deserve recognition and maintenance, even if they are subject to change and are partly adaptive to it. These traditions can be used as a basis for expanding the local economy and for incremental modernization. The heritage of the peoples and landscapes in Southwest Ethiopia can also be seen in this light. Livestock raising in these semi-arid lower areas of the Omo Valley, especially when more invested in, is a better option than the costly irrigated agriculture complexes that use massive amounts of water from a dwindling Omo River and are taking a heavy toll on the local soils, landscape, and biodiversity. The latter option makes tens of thousands of people dependent on mono-crops like sugar, which are subject to serious price global fluctuations, impoverished the ecology, thwarted local (river-bank) agriculture, and inhibited agropastoralism. Available environmentally rooted livelihoods and cultural complexes are too important to discard in the context of ill-prepared developmental schemes that are uncritically derived from ‘Western’ or global economic models and frameworks. Systematically addressing and incorporating these living heritage traditions, e.g., via a new investment approach, would ease the transition to new economic pathways and to new forms of place-making. In view of the big state interests, the political ecology of resource control, and the limits of governance in southern Ethiopia today (struggling with systemic corruption), it is unlikely to come off the ground, but it would be one trajectory toward countering the emerging environmental crunch.

Notes

1. The most critical and detailed indictment of the effects of the state-led transformation of the Omo River Basin comes from geographer Claudia Carr (2012, 2017). She in particular described the environmental and livelihood havoc wrought upon the Dassanech people in the Omo delta.
2. Cf. Smallteacher (2013), and Vidal (2015).
3. See already: 'Aid agencies turn blind eye to "catastrophe" in Ethiopia,' April 15, 2013 (<http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/9125>).
4. The Suri people—like many other ethnic groups in the South—have over the past two decades come to see their land or place (home territory) as a small dot in a wider world outside—due to state encroachment and cultural–ideological 'reform,' constant attacks from South Sudanese people like the Toposa, presence of tourism and missionaries, and development projects (cf. Turton 2005 on the Mursi).
5. This paper is based on field studies and post-field contacts with local conversation partners over the years 1999–2016, and information was drawn from observations, selected household surveys, interviews, and group discussions.
6. The Lower Omo Valley is also a UNESCO world heritage site. UNESCO has repeatedly called for protection of this area by the Ethiopian government (latest: UNESCO 2015).
7. Information from Abbink (2017a).
8. Maximum, it is usually lower: about 1100 mm, but about enough for shifting cultivation, especially of sorghum, in agropastoralist systems (Mursi, Kara, Kwegu, Nyangatom, Me'en, and Suri).
9. There are three subgroups: Chai, Tirmaga, and Baale. The Baale (self-name) speak a somewhat different language and are sometimes seen as a separate group. Part of them live in South Sudan (near the Boma Plateau). The three are therefore not really a unified ethnic unit. The exact number is not known. The 2007 Ethiopian national census figures are estimates based on an extrapolated sample.
10. See Buffavand (2017, 36).
11. Notably the local groups of Bayti, Boqol and K'asha.
12. Cf. the works of Silvester (2009), Feron (2008), or Temperley (2015). Cf. Abbink (2009b).

13. 'Sugar' may also be a risky choice for the future, seeing the fluctuating market prices, its more and more unfavorable image, and the emerging alternatives: cf. Cox (2014) (www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2017/nov/21/sugar-industry-withheld-research-effects-of-sucrose-50-years-ago-study-claims, accessed December 10, 2017).
14. Scientific research has made these points repeatedly, but with little impact in the policy sphere: Cardinale et al. (2012), Barbier (2014), Gross (2016), Masood (2015), Newbold (2015), Pardo and Macía (2015), etc.
15. See also Oakland Institute's report of (2014b).
16. The cosmological connections as recognized by the Mela people, across the Omo (cf. Buffavand 2017, 288–291), were not in evidence among Suri.
17. Well-explored for the related Mursi people in work by Brittain and Clack (2012), Brittain et al. (2013), Clack and Brittain (2011a, b, 2017) and for the Mela by Buffavand (2017), 215–234.
18. As the report on the 'Surma Agro-Pastoral Livelihood Zone' in the 2006 USAID *FEWS-Net report* (section 'SNNPR Livelihood Profile') also states (p. 1) (www.heaweb.org/countries/ethiopia/reports/hea-lz-profile-surma-agro-pastoral-livelihood-zone-sdp-snnpr-ethiopia, accessed June 5, 2010). But, there were a few exceptional crisis periods: see Abbink (2017a, 124).
19. Cellphones and accessories also became popular.
20. Cf. Wagstaff (2015), 25 on two mass killings on Suri in gold mining areas in 2012.
21. Cp. the very telling and in fact tragic case of the Gabbra, described in Fekadu (2014).
22. [http://et.one.un.org/content/dam/unct/ethiopia/docs/GTP%20English%20Vol1%20\(1\).pdf](http://et.one.un.org/content/dam/unct/ethiopia/docs/GTP%20English%20Vol1%20(1).pdf) (accessed February 20, 2017).
23. An extra underestimated effect of hydro-dams (like Gibe-3 and possible future dams) may be their contribution to short-term global warming: see M. H. Hurtado 2016, 'Dams raise global warming gas,' (www.scidev.net/global/energy/news/dams-raise-global-warming-gas.html, accessed November 10, 2017).
24. And up to 375,000 ha. if all future state and private plantations are added up.
25. More than half of it done by late 2017.
26. Ricketts et al. (2010, 1) estimated already that the destruction of forests worldwide accounted for ca. 15% of the greenhouse gas emissions.

While Ethiopia formally acceded to the emission reduction conventions and to donor country plans on maintaining forest cover and biodiversity (and has contributed to this in the past), it has now chosen for a developmental path that pushes virtually all environmental aims and costs aside (cf. UNESCO 2015, 17). Thus, in practice, no environmental recovery or biodiversity policy is seen on the ground (despite the nice plans: FDRE 2005, and despite advice from its own Wildlife and Conservation Authority: EWCA 2010). A new start was made—also donor-funded—with the ‘IGAD Regional Biodiversity Policy’ plan of 2016 (IGAD 2016), but again there is no evidence of meaningful consultation or understanding of local peoples as ‘stakeholders,’ and the external conservation vision on landscape and environment predominates. On p. 7 of this document it says: ‘Member States shall promote joint management of transboundary and shared biodiversity resources and Protected Areas, involving local communities at all times.’ But so far, little evidence of this is seen. There is no discussion either on how the ambitious plans for such biodiversity maintenance will articulate or clash with the ‘development’ plans of the IGAD state governments.

27. In the Southern Block, the Nyangatom area and part of the Omo Park will be covered, right up to the southern part of Dirga.
28. An excellent study on which I rely here is WWF (2004).
29. As evident from a recent internal report (see FDRE Policy Research Centre 2017), the management of projects like the Omo Kuraz sugar project is also riddled with corruption and mismanagement of public funds, which takes its toll on human resource management, rights of local people, and on the environment. Cf. also *Addis Standard* (2017).
30. In addition, such resettlement from one region to another also skirts around the national need for a strong policy on population growth control.
31. First mention: Mehret Tesfaye, ‘Ethiopia: Malaysian investor launches 3.7 b. *birr* palm oil tree plantation,’ *ENA News*, May 9, 2009 (www.ethiopianreview.com/articles/4257, accessed July 5, 2011).
32. This was based on misperceptions and distrust. There *was* no tax to be paid because the government had given the company a tax reprieve for the first five years.
33. And laid down in the FDRE’s *Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation* (Procl. No. 456/2005), *Negarit Gazeta* (Addis Ababa) 11(44), 2005.

34. A promised pipe water system is incompletely installed and does not function properly.
35. A 2011 report from EWCO staff also warned of the great tensions between sugar plantation investment and wildlife diversity: Cherie et al. (2011).
36. The presence of Chinese project workers has led to an upsurge of ivory hunting and illicit trade.
37. Information from Me'en informant, Addis Ababa, December 2016.
38. Last field information is of December 2016.
39. In 2016, alarming reports and pictures came out of local Suri people beaten up and put in slave-like chains. See: 'Ethiopia goes chain gang,' with photographs (<http://thehornpost.com/ethiopia-goes-chain-gang/>, accessed November 10, 2016). Human physical security in general has declined, due to the ongoing violent conflicts and enforced disarmament. Many locals (among them women and children) were killed by Kuraz Company drivers, and revenge actions were done in return, e.g., in November 2017: 13 highland drivers were killed by local people in a concerted attack.
40. Cp. Lewis (2015), Tickell (2015).
41. For example, the costs of the Omo Valley Kuraz sugar plantations outlay in 2011–2016 were \$3.6 bn (Kamski 2016a, 568).

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