

# **The Shrinking Cultural and Political Space of East African Pastoral Societies**

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1.

Over the past century, the pastoral populations of Eastern Africa have been forced to deal with crises of various kinds. Colonial subjection and 'pacification', marginalisation by the postcolonial state, ecological and economic problems and 'ethnic' tensions have lead to persistent problems in the sphere of national integration and simply of survival. At present we may see a sort of 'end-phase' in this process, in that the attempts at politico-economic incorporation or subjection of these groups can signify either an imminent destruction of their and socio-cultural fabric and modes of existence (cf. Burton 1994), or a crippling dependence on state or non-governmental aid agencies (cf. Fratkin 1991 on the Ariaal).

In the context of the late nineties, the question remains what long-term effects these crises in state-society relations, politico-cultural discourse, ecological-economic conditions and in ethnic relations will have. Most likely is a scenario of more protracted violent conflicts in the pastoral 'fringe regions', of half-hearted NGO-supported efforts to promote their 'development' (i.e., to sedentarize and 'peasantize' them), and of a selective incorporation of entrepreneurial/semi-criminal elite groups into the national urban-bureaucratic strata of these countries.

The majority of these agro-pastoral societies<sup>1</sup> - if not on the verge of destruction in ethnocide and creeping genocide, as in southern Sudan - will probably attempt to maintain some economic and cultural autonomy. Although there is substantial out migration to urban areas, pastoral society is also being reproduced. They are limited in population but still occupy vast tracts of land.<sup>2</sup>

In general, the relation of pastoral societies with the 'outside world' have proved to be one of structural deterioration. This poses questions as to the remaining political space and the nature of ethno-religious identities of these societies within the state arenas to which they nominally belong.

The political dynamics of pastoralist societies have received much attention, be it from an ethnological point of view (studies of the indigenous socio-political

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<sup>1</sup> Excluding here the Arab/Islamic agro-pastoralists of central and northern Sudan (Baqqara, Humr, Kababish, Missiriya, etc.).

<sup>2</sup> E.g., the 'pastoral areas' of Ethiopia were estimated to cover 61% of the country (cf. UNDP/RRC 1983).

order), or from a political- economic one (state - local society relations). The cultural and religious aspects have been less studied<sup>3</sup>, although cultural difference and also oppression were often a concomitant of other inequalities (cf. Donham 1986: 12-13; Markakis 1994: 225).

While they do not significantly determine religion and politics on the level of the contemporary postcolonial states, pastoral groups are seen by state administrations as sources of instability with a high 'nuisance value'. Some groups also occupy areas of occasional strategic and economic value (southern Sudan potential oil sources, Ogaden's natural gas reserves, gold in the Ethiopian Surma country). A new comparative overview is needed of recent religio-cultural and political dynamics of these pastoral populations, against the background of ethnological studies made in an earlier era, where the impact of political-economic crises, globalization processes, and violent social transformations was less obvious.

While the title of this contribution mentions 'pastoral societies', this does not mean that such entities can in all respects be delineated, as 'societies', from others: there are always cross-cutting contacts and shady boundaries (cf. Schlee 1989). 'Society' here is more referred to in the sense of a named socio-cultural tradition, the adherents of which recognize each other as a part of a 'normative/moral community', a ritual tradition and a political unit. The term 'space' refers to the (competitive) domain where political power is forged and contested, the battleground of state and local society. The space for political action (any action undertaken by individuals or groups with reference to defined or perceived 'common purposes' vis-à-vis other groups or state institutions) of pastoralists is decisively shrinking.

## 2.

Agro-pastoral peoples in East Africa have played some political role in the colonial and in the post-independence period, either as sources of 'civil unrest and disturbance' for the authorities, or as part of political and regional rebel movements<sup>4</sup> (cf. Markakis 1987, 1993). But they have never dominated the national scene. In the 'modernist' project of the post-colonial 'nation-states' - with ideals of 'cultural unity' and 'national integration' - pastoral peoples were not successfully engaged as partners.<sup>5</sup> In addition, there was also a clear 'civilisational' bias against them -

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<sup>3</sup> A recent collection on religion and politics in East Africa (Hansen and Twaddle 1994) has no substantial contributions on pastoralist groups.

<sup>4</sup> But pastoralist people have seldom played a central role in guerilla movements with national ambitions. Exceptions are the Dinka and Nuer in the Sudanese civil war, and the Beni Amer and other Islamic lowland groups in Eritrea, who became supporters of the Eritrean Liberation Front in 1960 (See Markakis 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Except perhaps in the case of (elite groups of) the Maasai and Kalenjin in Moi's Kenya, and, obviously, the Afar and Issa in Djibouti.

their economic practices were condemned, their cultural practices were often proscribed by national governments, and their traditions submerged. E.g., large-scale initiation-rituals among the Ethiopian Sidama and Boran were forbidden during the Mengistu-regime. Pastoral people were thus consistently alienated from the state.

In the wake of political-economic marginalisation and social crisis (cf. Campbell 1993; Markakis 1993), pastoralists were forced into a variety of responses, ranging from submissive adaptation and violent self-maintenance to massive flight into neighbouring countries. In all cases, this has brought a profound restructuring of their socio-cultural organisation and identity. This process in itself shows aspects of innovation and transformation. Processes of reinvention and selective use of 'tradition' for political ends have been described for many societies, especially in Melanesia and the Pacific (cf. Keesing 1992). But such studies are still scarce for Eastern Africa.

### 3.

In these processes, *religion* may come to play an increasingly important role, not exclusively in terms of a conversion of pastoralist groups to Christianity or Islam<sup>6</sup>, but also in terms of a return to, or reinvention of, the indigenous ritual tradition. This had offered them a cosmology and an ideology of the relationship between humans and nature. It was connected with rites of passage and often contained elements like age-grade organisation (which has religious-ritual aspects), spirit possession, divination, priest-like ritual leaders, and prophets. Traditional cosmologies and political mediatory institutions can continue to provide sources for the redefinition of power, authority, social order, and political identity of the group (cf. Behrend 1993, 1995; Prunier 1993; Hamer 1977). Not only the state has influenced this. Also the presence of the Catholic and Protestant missions and the Islamic conversion campaigns have had a shaping impact on the religious dynamics in Eastern Africa. Even if in the pastoral areas mentioned above, the presence of missionaries and the pastoralists' receptivity to the monotheistic message has not been overwhelming (except, in historic times, in Somalia), this message has been heard there for a long time, and has in some ways become a frame of reference.<sup>7</sup>

Another factor stimulating the reorganisation of tradition and the forging of new models of political action is *ethnicity*, the representations referring to shared ideas of historical origin, descent, and cultural style. It has been seized upon in the last few decades in the wake of state crisis and 'resource competition' in a wide sense

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<sup>6</sup> Both problematic. See for example Beswick (1994), claiming that the Dinka pastoral lifestyle could not accommodate Islam, *despite* centuries of contact.

<sup>7</sup> A full study of the impact of the missions among, specifically, the pastoralist peoples of Eastern Africa still remains to be undertaken.

(population growth, shrinking pastures, drought and famine conditions). Obviously, ethnic identification is now a major ideological idiom of political action, though it is not its cause. In some countries, 'ethnicization' is being stimulated from above, with ethnic identity becoming the framework of 'official politics' (Ethiopia), or, as elsewhere, the *de facto* discourse of divisive politics (Kenya). How ethnic identification fits in with religious factors is not always clear. Neither is the future development of the collective identity of these pastoral polities predictable. Far too often there is an assumption that they will automatically be drawn into the 'great traditions' of Christianity or Islam so as to broaden their support base both materially and ideologically. But, in the face of the visible failure and fragmentation of the state and the poor institutional structures of civil society, they will also be inclined to revert to models and ideas from their own ethnic-indigenous, often already monotheist and ritually very complex, tradition in a bid to negotiate their autonomy and group identity within an uncertain political space.

#### 4.

The pastoral societies of the East African region, while varied in nature and social organisation, still show some common characteristics with regard to religion and political system.

a) A first element in pastoral societies of the region is obviously the *segmentary principle*, on the basis of moiety, clan, or lineage. Regardless of the fact whether systems of balanced segmentary opposition 'exist' in the form so imaginatively described by, e.g., Evans-Pritchard (*The Nuer*, 1940), it has become clear in the Somali civil war as well as in southern Sudan (with the splintering of the SPLA in various Nuer and Dinka sections along 'tribal lines') and among some Ethiopian Oromo and Somali groups, that segmentary group identities are very much alive as organizing vessels of historical consciousness (see also Schlee 1989) or group identity.

This may even hold for smaller ethnic groups, such as the Ethiopian Surma. In 1993, this group was caught up in a serious violent conflict with their agricultural neighbours (Dizi), as well as with the Ethiopian state authorities. Local soldiers of the new EPRDF-government tried to deal with the problems, but did not make much headway. At one point, Londosa, a chief ritual leader of the Surma (Chai), declared that he would no longer deal with "small-time, insignificant soldiers" who "just happened to be sent there" by the central government. He demanded to be received by the new Ethiopian president Meles Zenawi himself. For him, this was the only person to deal with, being 'structurally equal' to himself in the political system as he saw it: he as the representative of the Surma polity, Meles as that of the Ethiopian highland state, successor of the *Dergue* regime. Of course, Meles did not come, and the conflict was 'resolved' with the force of arms in late 1993.

In general, however, it is unlikely that the segmentary principle can act as a uniting force for distinct pastoral peoples. The demise of Somalia, and of a united SPLA are perhaps examples of the disintegrating force of segmentation, which has now proceeded to destroy the overarching common framework.

b) *Political life* within most pastoral societies in the region is still regulated by forms of *age- or generation-grade organisation*, which, for instance, means that one age-group of initiated (male) elders is in a position of normative authority. Usually a younger 'warrior grade' is below it, entrusted with defence and raiding activities. These structures have been described by, e.g., Almagor and Baxter (1978), Spencer (1988), Tornay (1989), and Lamphear (1992). Age-organisation can in many respects be considered as a special model for ordering political life and for constructing authority, combining (gendered) democracy with hierarchy. In combination with the segmentary principle, it generates a system not primarily geared to expansion but to stable reproduction and structural equality vis-à-vis outsider groups, including the state<sup>8</sup>. Among groups such as the Boran, an elaborate cosmology is an integrated part of the age organisation, delimiting certain ritual cycles within the socio-political organisation itself.

Due to political and economic upheavals, reinforced by drought conditions, population growth and land scarcity, these structures come under severe stress. Ethnic and ritual-religious factors may then enter as elements of group realignment and 'resource competition', but the recourse to the great monotheistic religious ideologies is limited. What such pastoral groups in crisis will often explore first is the potential of their own cultural heritage, as feasible in their local conditions. Several groups have been relatively successful in this effort. The best historical example is perhaps that of the Turkana, who, for some period, developed an efficient and unprecedented military organisation in their confrontation with the British colonial power in Kenya. It was based on diviner-prophets and the age-set system (the *ruru-grade*). (cf. Lamphear 1992).

c) Religion was localized, based on the idea of ordering the relations between humans and nature. It has not prominently figured as a vehicle for political *mobilisation* among agro-pastoral groups in East Africa, neither in the colonial era nor in the post-independence period. But traditionally, the role of ritual mediators, 'priests', or prophets has been notable among them. The Nuer had their 'leopard-skin chiefs' or earth-masters (*kuaar muon*), the Dinka their 'masters of the fishing-spear' (*beny bith*), and the Surma their *komoru* (a kind of ritual figurehead). Prophets were common religious agents in several societies, such as the Nuer (cf. Johnson 1994), Maasai (Waller 1995) and Samburu (Fratkin 1979), and also traditional foci of leadership, reconciliation and rebellion, brought out fully in times of severe crisis. In other societies, such as the Somali, there were the marabout-like saints, but these

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<sup>8</sup> Exceptions are perhaps the 19th century Nuer and the Maasai, who saw a long phase of demographic and territorial expansion.

never had a real trans-regional following. Also, due to its universality among the Somali, Islam never became a vehicle of political protest, as among some groups in Ethiopia (such as the Arsi Oromo in their resistance to Abyssinian-Christian domination; cf. Abbas Haji 1993: 16). In Somalia this only happened in the time of the British and Italian colonial presence in the early decades of this century, when a new type of leader, combining religious and political functions, emerged in the person of Mohamed Abdilleh Hassan. In the independence period, Islamic identity, in its 'fundamentalist', or better 'revivalist', shape, emerged only in the recent civil war, probably in an attempt to supersede both the perceived threat to 'Somali culture' from 'foreign influences', as well as the segmentary principle, which had led Somalia to the brink of destruction.<sup>9</sup> In Ethiopia, however, the Ogaden Somalis mobilized largely under the banner of Islam to resist on account of economic and political oppression (cf. Markakis 1987: 191f.), and united with Islamic Arsi Oromos.

But in general, the pastoral peoples - insofar as they still can be seen as collectivities - rarely revert to ritual and religious practices with a *wider* political aim, e.g. toward national political arenas. The latter are of very recent date anyhow. The religious-ritual structures of pastoral peoples do indeed contain a political or a power ideology (cf. Tornay 1989), but it is a 'defensive' ideology: geared toward keeping a balance in ecological conditions (rains, pasture, fertility) and in the socio-political or cosmological order. Hence, their prime concern is to maintain or restore the integrity of their own way of life vis-à-vis others, and *not* to reform state societies of which they are considered a part, nor to form a state of their own (cf. Markakis 1987: 16).

It is plausible to argue that the principles of clan segmentation, age-group structure, the ritual-cyclical ordering of community life, and decentralized, regionally exercised power will remain more important organizing elements for pastoral societies than the purely ideological-religious factors<sup>10</sup>, although the two are not unconnected (cf. Fratkin 1979: 64). This is a predictable result of certain macro-conditions such as their necessary confinement to marginal areas, the geographical mobility, and their lack of integration into the wider state society in terms of literacy, economic surplus extraction, social mobility, or political representation.

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<sup>9</sup> The present 'war lords' in Mogadishu and some other urban areas are, in a sense, the last product of this segmentary fission of Somali society, but they cannot build up any traditional authority or religious prestige, and can never attain long-term acceptance or legitimacy.

<sup>10</sup> Unless massive externally financed religious conversion or propaganda campaigns are set up - as seems to be done by certain Saudi Arabian and Iranian groups in Kenya, Sudan, Ethiopia, Malawi, Nigeria.

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In this context, comparative research on the various agro-pastoral groups and their 'strategies' in terms of religious response and political action *within* these macro-conditions (which show important similarities across East African countries) is imperative, e.g., in order to arrive at models of pastoral politico-religious action. Some groups would be on the 'traditional' end of the typological continuum of politico-religious action, such as the Surma or the Boran (Ethiopia), others on the 'modern' end, e.g., the Somali (with the state experience and the pervasive impact of 'globalization' forces) or the Turkana (more missionized, more economic development schemes and Kenyan state and NGO influence).

In what follows, however, we confine ourselves to a consideration of a few groups, one of which was the object of field research in the past years.

a) *Accommodation and flexibility: the Boran*

The Boran in Ethiopia and Kenya form a large pastoral group of several hundred thousand, with their complex religious-ritual structure largely intact. They were militarily and economically the dominant group in the region in pre-colonial times (up to ca. 1900), involved in the regional long-distance trade to the coast, e.g., with Somalis and Kenyans. Important aspects of their sociocultural organisation are the age- and generation-set system (*gaada*) and their ritual-cosmological cycles (well described by Baxter, Haberland, Asmarom Legesse, Bassi, and others). The segmentary principle is present in that they are also organized in clans and moieties.

While there is scholarly dispute over whether or not the *gaada* system had mainly political functions in the past (as a vehicle for recruitment of warriors (in the *raaba* grade) and thus for expansion,<sup>11</sup> it certainly combined several organisational purposes. It encoded a world view, models of personal social identity, and a balanced relationship with the natural environment (e.g., via population control rules). It had thus religious and community functions (Baxter, *ibid.*) which characterized the Boran way of life as opposed to others. The discussion over the fact of the military role of the *gaada* (in the context of which the notorious 'killer complex' of the Boran was developed) shows that the system was part of a flexible and accommodative response of Boran society to outside developments. In 1988, for example, the great pan-Boran *gaada*-assembly (Schlee 1994: 980) discussed whether the old requirement to 'kill an enemy' in order to ritually qualify for initiation in a grade could be rescinded.

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<sup>11</sup> P. Baxter (1978: 178) thinks that the *gaada* had no pervasive political and other practical functions. This is certainly true for for the 20th century. It is, however, very likely that after the 16th century reorganisation of the *gaada*, bringing in line ideal and actual ages of the new sets, a large class of young warriors (*raaba*) was created which allowed the Oromo to expand spectacularly (cf. Schlee 1994: 979).

Although most Boran follow their traditional religion, there are also Christian and Islamic Boran groups<sup>12</sup>, or other Oromo-speaking Islamic groups (Garre, Degodia). This leads to a confusion of 'ethnic' and religious identification. Religious identity tends more to become a basis for group identity and mobilization: e.g., in the earlier-mentioned conflict with the Arsi Oromo (in league with the expanding Somali) in the 1960s, the common ethnicity of the Boran as Oromo proved to be superseded by religious factor: Islam versus traditional religion. The Arsi, then as in 1941-42, sided with the Somali (see Markakis 1987: 195). In the ethnic rebel movements of the 1970s and 1980s, these groups were strongly represented (SALF, OALF), although they were partly coopted by the Somali government in its drive to undermine Ethiopian state authority.

In modern times, the Boran *gaada* organisation did not serve as a rallying point for political rebellion against oppressive state authorities, such as the Mengistu regime. The Boran tried to accommodate and keep alive their own ritual cycles, bypassing or modifying state directives on the basis of elements from their own social organisation (cf. Hogg 1993: 63, 69, 81).

After the change of power in Addis Ababa in 1991, a confusing and violent period of identity struggle and ethno-religious conflict broke out (cf. Schlee 1994), in which Boran traditional religion became a renewed focus of identity not only vis-à-vis Islamic Somali, Gabbra and Garre but also vis-à-vis other 'Oromo' - including even the OLF people. In the discussion about the future status of religious affiliations in a more autonomous or state-like structure ('Oromia'), the question becomes how the traditional Boran religion as well as Islam (both with political implications) could be reconciled in such an 'all-Oromo entity' which needs to be secular to accommodate all groups (Cf. Schlee's highly interesting discussion, 1994: 986). Up to now, traditional Boran religion could find an accommodative form under various state arrangements (Haile Sellassie, *Dergue*), but, ironically, in the new political context of forced ethnic identity and of competing religious allegiances this may become increasingly problematic. Local-level instability will be the result.

#### b) *Disengagement and polarization: the Nuer*

The Nuer, a large pastoralist people who live both in Sudan and Ethiopia, are going through probably the most turbulent and destructive period of their existence. During the confrontation with 19th century Egyptian expansion in the Sudan (Muhamad Ali's government) as well as in the time of the Mahdist revolts they had suffered onslaughts (slave-raiding, cattle raids, killings), but were also able to significantly expand their territory at the cost of the Dinka and Anuak. Under British colonial administration in the early decades of this century, several Nuer revolts were violently suppressed, and systematic efforts were made to eliminate

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<sup>12</sup> E.g., the Isiolo-Boran in Kenya converted to Islam in the early decades of this century.



their prophets, such as killing Guek Ngundeng and Dak Dhon, and imprisoning Kolang Keth or Pok Kerjiok for life (cf. Johnson 1994: 199, 230, 330).

But the worst period was to be the present civil war, raging since 1983. Since independence in 1956, Arab-Islamic led national governments in Sudan have succeeded in fully alienating the non-Islamic groups from the national political arena, culminating into a wholesale campaign to root out traditional religions and Nilotic cultures. While some Nuer groups (e.g., Lou, Gaajak) have also occasionally been led to cooperate with the National government against rival (Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk) groups within the southern rebel movement SPLA, there seems to be no doubt about the ultimate strategic aims of the government: complete Islamization and Arabization of all southern Sudan. In these conditions of external threat and social upheaval, the prophets, people possessed by a spirit or a divinity, have continued to be rallying points in Nuer life, expressing central religious and social values (despite that they all stand in the shadow of their great predecessors, such as Ngundeng Bong, who died in 1906. Cf. Johnson 1994: 329).

In the course of this war, Nuer society and religion have taken on a more militant character than ever. The prophets have been emerging both as full-fledged war leaders and as political mediators, although, as Johnson stresses (1994: 326), the war did not *create* them. Evans-Pritchard (in the 1930s) had rightly described the prophets as indigenous political leaders, but he also pointed to their role as predominantly religious authorities. In this capacity they are of continued relevance in the present conflict, both within the Nuer society as well as outside it (Johnson 1994: 324-25, 348), and much of the conflict itself is still interpreted by the Nuer in terms of the comments and predictions of the earlier generation of prophets. In addition, we may say that the ideological and political structure of Nuer society itself will, of necessity, always *generate* prophets, as healers, mediators, or controllers of spirits. A purely 'secular' identification of Nuer, as distinct from their traditional religious heritage, will be unlikely.<sup>13</sup>

c) *Selective autonomy: the Surma*

This southern Ethiopian group (two subgroups: ca. 18,000 Chai; ca. 10,000 Tirma), living south of Maji town near the Sudanese border. They inhabit a remote, drought-prone but fertile lowland area, good for livestock-herding. The Surma are a segmentary society on the basis of clan identities, have territorial sections and an age-grade structure. Three ritual leaders (*komoru*) from three hereditary clan lines, function as religious, priest-like mediator figures and as 'rain-masters'. The Surma have been noted for their drive for independence and autonomy vis-à-vis their agriculturalist neighbours in the highlands as well as the Ethiopian state, although they remain dependent on local markets for trading cattle, iron tools, food products, and more recently gold and ammunition. The attempt at political incorporation of

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<sup>13</sup> Riek Machar, the leader of the break-away Nuer (Nasir) faction of the SPLA is a lineal descendant of the first prophet of the 'free-divinity' TENY (Johnson 1994: 346).

the Surma in the Ethiopian state started only after 1941, when Haile Sellassie returned from exile. A kind of 'tributary' structure was all that was achieved. Until 1967, the Surma paid some taxes (in kind), and were patrolled by a nominal police force until the early 1980s. Under the *Dergue*, they initially received some veterinary assistance, medical care and primary education, but these services dissolved in the 1980s.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the relations of the Surma with neighbouring groups (Nyangatom, Dizi, Anuak), and later also with the Ethiopian government, deteriorated sharply, as a result of a combination of factors: 1. the escalating Sudanese civil war, which brought about population movements and a large clandestine influx of automatic rifles and ammunition, 2. cattle disease (e.g., anthrax) and diminishing pastures, 3. drought and famine (1984-85). Violent local conflict in the mid-1980s led the Surma (both Chai and Tirma) away from their ancestral areas near Mt. Shulugui (or Naita) and the Tirma Range. Encroachment on lands of the (Omotic-speaking) sedentary Dizi people led to numerous violent incidents, while the massive availability of automatic rifles precipitated raiding and robbery on traders, teachers and travellers. This was perpetrated especially by members of the 'warrior-grade' (the *tègay*), the uninitiated 'youngsters', who capitalized on their newly-won power so much that they threatened the social equilibrium within Surma society itself: it led to autonomous violent action, sanctioned by neither the elders of the 'reigning' age-grade (*rórà*) nor by the religious chief, the *komoru* (cf. Abbink 1994). They also undermined the age-old ritual agreement (based on common sacrifice) which existed between the Dizi chiefs and the Surma, which meant that the latter could apply to the former to perform rain-rites in times of serious drought. This upsurge in violence coincided with tensions in the age-grade system. The reign of the *rórà*-grade (called Neebi) had been expected to end in the early 1980s, and the initiation of a new set was long overdue. An additional anomaly was that the present *komoru* was also still a 'youngster' (*tègay*), while he should be a *rórà*, to enhance his authority. He could only exert little restraining influence on his age-mates, as his position was structurally equal to them, not above them. Thus, his 'religious position', as mediator between the Sky-God and humans (guaranteeing his being a conduit for rain, growth, fertility, order, etc.), was eclipsed by the demands of the age-set system.<sup>14</sup> The ongoing violence led to a crisis in Surma society in which it even looked doubtful whether a new age-set ceremony would ever be held.

The enduring problems with the Dizi people finally led to a confrontation with the state authorities, who sent in soldiers in 1992-93 to deal with the 'Surma problem'. A battle in October 1993 made hundreds of Surma (Chai) victims. It also appeared to tone down the violence of the *tègay*-grade. A year later, the Chai Surma elders decided to organize the initiation ceremony for a new *rórà* age-set (cf.

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<sup>14</sup> The impact of a Christian mission station (with foreign and Ethiopian members) in the Surma area has been marginal in the five years of its existence. Surma have no serious interest in the Christian message, which is seen as being irrelevant to their culture, life-style and mentality.

Abbink 1997), thereby 'abdicating' their own collective power. This could be seen as an attempt to set the stage for a reordering of Surma society in the face of external threats to their continued autonomous existence.

6.

Pastoral societies, by nature located in ecological and economic fringe-areas, will form an enduring, irresolvable challenge for national political structures in Eastern Africa. None of the countries has really succeeded in involving these groups in national 'decision-making processes', nor has envisaged a future for them *as* nomadic pastoralists. Even less so is there a valuation of their cultural and religious traditions. But these societies will also - provided they can maintain a sufficient measure of economic viability - be a challenge for themselves, obliged to find novel ways of cultural survival in a world which failed its promises.

The modernist ideals of the nation-state and of 'national integration' (posed by an earlier generation of politicians and scholars, cf. Yohannis 1979: 283f.) may now be a thing of the past, but the question as to the forms of accommodation and of a *modus vivendi* between states - or what remains of them - and pastoral societies wishing to retain some of their autonomy is still valid. It has never been sufficiently recognized, neither by state elites nor by scholars, that pastoral groups, next to different political-economic interests, will have strongly different cultural commitments. Religion and ritual do form an important part of these, but not in any predictable ways. The study of this theme will entail more than just a history of the 'expansion' of Christianity or Islam in these areas (cf. Chrétien 1993: 7-8), because 'traditional practices' form an active element in the ongoing processes of identity formation and political struggle. The religious imagination in a fragmented, globalized world goes well beyond the canonical forms of Christian and Islamic monotheism, which accommodate pluralism only with great difficulty. Traditional religious forms also define the *realm of legitimacy* of claims to political authority in states or post-state societies, and for this reason alone remain of vital importance.

We conclude that at least two developments among pastoral peoples of East Africa will continue to stand out:

Religious-ritual responses as 'strategies of meaning' in conditions of upheaval. Islamic or Christian elements will be utilized, but appropriated and used in combination with elements from their own ritual cycles - as these remain organisationally relevant for their society. Religious 'crisis-movements' (cf. the Alice Lakwena phenomenon) will continue to emerge, drawing upon the rich regional traditions of prophets and ritual mediators (cf. Anderson and Johnson 1995). The impact of globalization, in the spread of technology (also arms) and ideas or fragments of ideologies, increasing everywhere in Africa, will be felt and lead to a transformation of religious-cultic expression in discourse and practice. There will also be a continuing interface between segmentary or

descent ideas - culturally constructed - and religious-political symbols, as these can serve as idioms to claim rights, both in a material and ideological sense.

Due to the general insecurity of existence, the environmental threats, state incapacity or neglect, and the spread of weapons and ammunition, the option of *violence*, either as local rebellion against state encroachment or as a regular but more aggressive extension of traditional raiding practices, will always remain strong in pastoralist East Africa. Macro-political factors, mentioned above, may thus contribute to the development and maintenance of 'cultures of violence', where the *instrumental* use of force will eventually be come to be encoded in *expressive* cultural practices themselves (cf. Abbink 1993, 1994). As part of this, military and religious functions may occasionally be merged, as we know is the case with some Nuer prophets involved in the current Southern Sudanese war.

Ultimately, understanding the models of human agency which forge new cultural forms against the background of the domestic crises, critical material conditions, and global social forces which affect them is the greatest challenge in the study of the changing identity and political space of pastoralist peoples.

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