



# OMO: LOCAL TRIBES UNDER THREAT

A FIELD REPORT FROM THE OMO VALLEY, ETHIOPIA

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The author of this field report is not mentioned by name to ensure that access to local communities is not undermined and to allow for future fieldwork.

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Welekibo, the main leader of the Suri tribe, and the most famous rebel of Tulgit in the Omo Valley.

Welekibo, a Suri warrior, has been on the run for months from the sniper attacks of the Ethiopian army, which is pursuing him in the forest surrounding Tulgit, in Ethiopia's Omo Valley, near the Sudanese border.

Welekibo's crime: he is leading the resistance against the government's major land lease project that will forcefully seize hundreds of thousands of hectares of fertile land from the local indigenous populations and use it for state farms or rent it to foreign corporations at low prices.

Despite promises of development, previously detailed by an Oakland Institute report,<sup>1</sup> the government's land lease scheme has led to forced resettlement and human rights violations of the Mursi, Suri, and Bodi agro-pastoralist tribes at the hands of the Ethiopian Defense Forces (EDF). There are also serious concerns about the impact of this "rapid development" on the environment and the livelihoods of the 500,000 indigenous people that rely on the waters of the Omo River and the adjacent lands, as well as Lake Turkana.

*"We are not beggars. We just want to be left in peace with our cows. We drink their blood and milk and soon we will not be able to have enough to survive."*

—Welekibo, Suri warrior

*"It's pure robbery! The corruption has reached the highest levels of government; the lands are sold to the rich and powerful of foreign countries, everyone just helps themselves!"* affirmed Welekibo when I spoke to him on July 3, 2012 in the forest around Tulgit.

The Suri have always lived on this land. Until the 1990s no roads led to them, exempting the Suri from the "development" schemes emanating from Addis Ababa. But that has changed now. Speaking to the locals, I gather that today hundreds of Suri are in jail in Tum, and around 150 people have been killed in the conflict over land over the last year.





Suri tribe warrior with body painting.

The Lower Omo Valley in Southern Ethiopia is internationally renowned for its unique cultural and ecological landscape. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Lower Omo Valley contains two national parks and is home to approximately 200,000 agro-pastoralists made up of some of Africa's most unique and traditional ethnic groups, including the Kwegu, Bodi, Suri, Mursi, Nyangatom, Hamar, Karo, and Dassenach, among others. Historically, the area has been very isolated, and the agro-pastoralists have little experience with industrial agriculture. While livelihoods differ along the length of the Omo Valley and between ethnic groups, the majority are agro-pastoralists who practice flood-retreat agriculture on the banks of the Omo River and also raise cattle where the annual flooding of the Omo River replenishes important grazing areas. For many of these ethnic groups, cattle are a source of pride, wealth, and food, and are intimately tied to cultural identity. The annual flooding of the Omo River dictates the rhythms of life and culture that permeate the area. But with the announcement of the Gibe III dam, the livelihoods and culture of the indigenous people of the South Omo Valley face decimation.





The Omo river in Korcho, Ethiopia.

## Damning the Omo

Seeking economic growth, the Ethiopian government embarked on plans to build the most powerful hydroelectric dam in Africa—the \$2 billion Gibe III dam on the Omo River—with the intent to transform the Omo Valley into an agro-industrial powerhouse. Originally conceived in the mid-1990s and encouraged by international development agencies, the project was moved toward implementation in the late 2000s by the Ethiopian government.

Gibe III is expected to double the energy capacity of Ethiopia. The collected water will be stored in a giant reservoir that will be used to irrigate plantations via hundreds of kilometers of pipelines, while the land of the indigenous tribes will be dried up or flooded depending on its location.

At present, 445,000 hectares have been earmarked by the state for plantations that will be irrigated from the dam.<sup>2</sup> Both banks of the Omo River are contested areas. I decided to visit to the West, the area where the Suri face the Malaysian-owned plantation run by Lim Siow Jin Estate in Koka<sup>3</sup> and the East where the land of the Bodi and Mursi has been given away to the Hana plantations. Reports from the ground have brought forward disturbing evidence of the Ethiopian government's efforts to force the Suri, Bodi, and Mursi tribes out of their ancestral land to pave way for large agricultural plantations. More than 2,000 heavily armed soldiers are deployed in the region.<sup>4</sup> I personally witnessed the heavy presence of soldiers in Kibish, the main town of the Suri tribe.





Ethiopian army soldiers monitoring Suri people during a festival in Kibish.

Friends of Lake Turkana, a Kenyan NGO working to strengthen and advance the environment and natural resources agenda in the Turkana basin, reported in May 2012:<sup>5</sup>

“In Suri, the government has cleared all the grass and trees to allow Malaysian investors to establish plantations. Water has also been diverted from the mainstay Koka River to these plantations leaving the largely pastoral Suri without water for their cattle. [...] Following this violation of their rights, the Suri took arms and engaged the government forces. The government forces killed 54 unarmed Suri in the market place at Maji in retaliation. It is estimated that between 57 and

65 people died in the massacre and from injuries sustained on that day. Five more Suri have been killed since then [...] . Suri people are being arrested randomly and sentenced to 18, 20, and 25 years in prison for obscure crimes....”

## Relocation and Repression

But to truly grasp the depth of the ongoing repression associated with relocation to pave way for the large plantations, one must venture to the west bank of the Omo River, near the Sudanese border, to the land of the Suri tribe.

The government forces killed 54 unarmed Suri in the market place at Maji in retaliation. It is estimated that between 57 and 65 people died in the massacre and from injuries sustained on that day. Five more Suri have been killed since then [...] . Suri people are being arrested randomly and sentenced to 18, 20, and 25 years in prison for obscure crimes....”





There I meet Amod (name changed for security reasons), who has his left leg in a bamboo split that serves as a cast. His family and his cows have come to keep him company. He is lying on the ground, surrounded by fodder for the animals and by stifling smoke coming from the fire that his wife is using to cook.

*“I was walking peacefully in my field when soldiers began shooting at me for no reason...I was shot with a bullet in my knee. I was lucky, that day 11 people were killed and the soldiers threw four bodies off Dima village bridge. They were eaten by hyenas, we only found their bones...”*

Officially, the government plan is to move the people of this area into new villages, where they are promised access to education and health facilities. But nothing comes: *“Here in Koka, the roads that we the Suri people have built were destroyed by the plantation’s trucks! Nothing is done to help us: the school, the clinic, the water, it’s us who did everything! We are getting no help at all!”* exclaims Barshota who lives in Kibish, where the enormous Lim Siow Jin plantation, financed by Malaysian investors, sits right in the middle of ancestral Suri land.

who has his left leg in a bamboo  
and his cow

Dassanech elder, Omorate, Ethiopia.



Suri man wounded by the security forces.



*"They destroyed everything; there is no more grass for our cows, we can no longer cross the fields, it's illegal; they are immense, we must walk for kilometers. Our children can no longer go to school, we can't even see the end when we look from afar,"* complains a woman who bends under the heavy weight of a filled jerry can.

A shepherd whose naked body is covered in white designs (a symbol of beauty) adds: *"They diverted the water to their fields and there is nothing left for our animals to drink, not to mention us! We have no choice but to go in the mountains; but it's dangerous, we might lose some cows."*

His helper, dressed in a cover labeled "Made in China" and casually resting on his shoulder and with many badges reading "Love," continues in a melancholy tone: *"The cows give less milk, sometimes we only drink blood."*

In an attempt to silence the criticism, the government claims that the plantations (which usually grow maize, sugar, palm oil, or cotton) will create 150,000 jobs. But inside the Koka plantation were only 20 workers, mostly from other parts of the country, not locals. The workers I met from impoverished tribes say that they are paid only 30 euros per month and they never stay very long. As pastoralists, all have a single goal: to save their wages to buy a new cow.

In Koka, a few Suri have given in and begun working at the plantation. *"We have no choice – the government forces us to stay and work for the plantation or be exiled. They also bring in people from other regions of Ethiopia to occupy our land,"* said a Suri worker I spoke to at the Koka plantation.

Locals report that a government tactic is to pit one tribe against another in order to better repress them in case of an uprising. *"The Dizzi receive taxes from the Malaysian plantation; they collaborate with the foreigners and encroach on the Suri land,"* asserts a former truck driver originally from Nazret, a city in central Ethiopia, who came to the South in the hope of making money. According to him and Surma witnesses, it is actually the Dizzi with the Ethiopian army who killed 54 people at Maji.

On the opposite side of the Omo River, the government has created a similar situation between the Bodi and the Konso. This led to tribal war, giving the government an excuse to intervene.

To make room for additional plantations in the area, the government plans to forcibly relocate some 100,000



Suri kids in front of the Malaysian plantation entrance in Koka.

pastoralists in new settlement villages. *"Each family has about 50 cows, what will we do if they die? They are our only asset,"* a Bodi cattle producer explained to me.

The situation is all the more tense since the government is expecting to allocate only half a hectare of land per family, a Bodi chief informs me. People will thus lose all the grazing land they need for their cattle. This is an attempt to change the Bodi way of life and convert them into plantation workers.

*"The government promises us paradise, but we know that we are going to hell,"* insists one of the aggrieved Bodis, *"Between tribes we have always found a solution, when a land conflict has arisen, but with the government it's impossible."*



Bodi tribe warriors posing on a bulldozer near Hana Mursi.

Kibo, a warrior from the Mursi tribe who are neighbors of the Bodi, testifies to the way in which the “volunteers,” as the resettled population is termed by the government, were forced to evacuate the UNESCO classified Mago Park area:

*“Entire families had to leave their lands. The elderly could often not walk anymore they were suffering so terribly. We are threatened by famine, we have less milk, less maize....Without good pastures for our cows, we are nothing. The military hunts us so we flee into the forest.”*

Just outside Hana, Ethiopia’s state-owned sugar corporation has seized 150,000 hectares to set up a sugar plantation. The plantation is expected to suck up three billion cubic meters of water annually from the river.<sup>6</sup>

South of Hana, close to the Kenyan border, I find Omorate, a big, dry village on the banks of the Omo River where the Dassanech live. I meet a chief who has an ivory necklace hanging around his neck. He lives right next to a giant pump belonging to the Italian company Fri El Green Power’s 60,000 hectare palm oil plantation that irrigates the surrounding fields, and the generator’s noise is abrasive and continuous.



Pump installed by the Italian company Fri El Green Power.

*Entire families had to leave their lands.*



Malaysian plantation in Koka near Kibish.

## Life On the Ground

On the road, I catch some bulldozers in the act of destruction: the trees are uprooted, everything is flattened.

At this Malaysian Koka plantation 2 to 3 army soldiers guard every bulldozer working in the fields.

Another consequence of the developments afoot in the region threatens to quickly decimate the tribes. Under the condition

of anonymity, a nurse working among the Mursi explains to me that the results of first blood tests he has conducted on the tribe are absolutely catastrophic.

He has uncovered numerous cases of Hepatitis B, a disease transferred through blood and sex. AIDS is prevalent as well. With a growing population of workers and soldiers moving into the tribal areas, prostitution is on the rise. Condom usage is nonexistent. Even the government recognizes the problem in official reports.





Suri gold panner, Tulgit.

## Tightening the Screws

Despite increased international attention to the situation, the government continues to increase repressive tactics and abuse in the region to benefit the plantations and silence any dissent.

Following my return, I keep getting worse news from the field.

The Suri no longer have the right to search for gold in the river. The mining areas will soon be sold to foreign investors.

Students who were protesting on Facebook thanks to the 3G mobile phone network were told to delete their accounts immediately by their university teachers or face the same fate as their comrades currently in Tum prison. The social media revolution has been effectively stifled.

Some roads in the region are closed to further isolate the tribes from visitors and witnesses. Traveling there is now declared to be “not recommended without exceptional reasons” by the Foreign Minister. The wife of Welekibo, the Suri rebel, was arrested and imprisoned in September 2012 in order to pressure her husband to turn himself in and face death. There has been no further news of her.

Four Suri chiefs were also thrown in prison in August 2012. Visits are forbidden and those who die locked up are not returned to their families for proper burial. Their relatives fear the worst.

According to a close local contact, 17 more people were killed near the Malaysian plantation in Koka, including women and children, in October 2012.





Suri boy leaning against a wall covered with Amharic and English, Tulgit.

In December 2012 and January 2013, I kept receiving more reports of killings of members of the Suri tribe.

Before I left the Omo Valley, the chief of the Bodi made me promise to return to see him. When I asked him where he would be next year, in his village or in the new settlements,

he replied, pointing his finger towards the ground, *“My father was born here. He is buried here. I don’t want to leave my land. If they try and force us, there will be war. So I will be here in my village either alive on the land or dead below it. But I’m not leaving here.”*

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Oakland Institute. Half a Million Lives Threatened by Land Development for Sugar Plantations in Ethiopia's Lower Omo Valley. Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa. September 2011.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Dr. Lim Siow Jin, a graduate of the Indian Institute of Technology, is the founder of DXN. The core business activities of DXN include cultivation, manufacturing and marketing of food supplements. Based in Malaysia with worldwide operation, the company is well-known for its Ganoderma (also known as Lingzhi, or King of Herbs) business. DXN's product lines also include food and beverages, personal care products, skin care and cosmetics, household products, and water treatment systems.
- 4 See More Killings in Lower Omo, Ethiopia. Friends of Lake Turkana. June 4, 2012. [www.friendsoflaketurkana.org/folt-blogs/item/210-more-killings-in-lower-omo-ethiopia](http://www.friendsoflaketurkana.org/folt-blogs/item/210-more-killings-in-lower-omo-ethiopia) (accessed January 8, 2013).
- 5 Friends of Lake Turkana. "Ethiopia Forcefully Evicting Omo Tribes for Sugar Plantations." Press Release. May 16, 2012. [www.friendsoflaketurkana.org/folt-news/2011-09-28-10-41-34/archive/view/listid-1-mailing\\_list/mailid-11-press-release-ethiopia-forcefully-evicting-omo-tribes-for-sugar-plantations](http://www.friendsoflaketurkana.org/folt-news/2011-09-28-10-41-34/archive/view/listid-1-mailing_list/mailid-11-press-release-ethiopia-forcefully-evicting-omo-tribes-for-sugar-plantations) (accessed December 14, 2012).
- 6 See Ethiopia tribesmen fear forced end to "backward" lifestyle, RNW, December 21, 2011. [www.rnw.nl/africa/article/ethiopia-tribesmen-fear-forced-end-%E2%80%9Cbackward%E2%80%9D-lifestyle](http://www.rnw.nl/africa/article/ethiopia-tribesmen-fear-forced-end-%E2%80%9Cbackward%E2%80%9D-lifestyle) (accessed January 10, 2013).

