THE SURMA LANGUAGE GROUP:  
A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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1. Introduction

The Nilo-Saharan super-family is one of the four great African language phyla identified by Greenberg in his successful attempt to bring order out of the chaos of African linguistic classification (see especially [Greenberg 1966, 1971]). In this paper, I will use "Sahelian" as an alternative name for "Nilo-Saharan", since it is nearly equivalent in a geographic sense and a bit more convenient. According to my reclassification [Bender 1976], Sahelian consists of nine families: Songay (Songhai), Saharan, Maba, Fur, East Sudanic, Central Sudanic, Berta, Kunama, and Koman.

East Sudanic is the most complex family, having in turn ten groups: Nubian, Surma (Didinga-Murle), Tabi (Ingessana), Nera, Nyimang, Temein, Tama, Daju, Nilotic, and Ngangea (Teuso).

The name "Didinga-Murle" is about as misleading for the second group as "Hindi-Urdu" would be for the Indo-European languages of India, since Didinga and Murle are one language, as are Hindi and Urdu. In fact, there are at least six languages in the group, and "Didinga-Murle" is far from capturing the diversity within the group, either geographically or linguistically.

Conti Rossini (referred to by Tucker and Bryan [1956:91, note 7], suggests "Surma" as a collective name for several tribes in southwest Ethiopia, extending into the Sudan. He noted similarities of names such as Suri, Shuro, Tirma. Muldrow [1976:605] refers to "Surma" as once having included Suri, Tirma, Mursi, Tid or Chai, Me'en (Tishena-Bodi), and elsewhere [personal communication] as also including Bale (Zilmamu). The Dizi (Maji) refer to the Me'en as "surbm". All-in-all, "Surma" seems to me a suitable name to be extended to the entire group, since it includes the geographical and linguistic core of the family.

A survey of the membership of the group at the present state of knowledge follows. Languages are given in a west to east geographical order.

1. Sudan: Didinga (self name: የሃ ከ ዓ ከ ዓ, 'word of Didinga'), Boya or Longarim ( የሃ ከ እሬን, 'people of Murle'). The Sudanese Murle consists of two main groups: Pibor (ጭ ከ እተለ, 'people of...
Lotilla'), and Boma Plateau (ći ci bom). Another group is the Irenge (ireŋe) or Tenget (тенет). Finally, the Ngalam (ŋalam, 'the people without cattle') are located on the Ethiopian border. The Didinga-Boya number a few thousand, the Murle total may be 40,000. All the above peoples speak one language with fairly minor local variations (but see Olam immediately below).

2. Ethiopia-Sudan border: There is some question as to whether the Ngalam may be the Olam (and thus not part of the Murle dialect cluster after all). Otherwise, small samples of data on Olam provided by Harvey Hoekstra [personal communication], Zilmamu (from Jack Strauder via Harold Fleming, personal communication), and Bale (collected by me in a village two hours north of the Surma American Presbyterian Mission Station in December 1974), indicate that Olam-Zilmamu-Bale is an independent dialect cluster, if not a language cluster. The people probably do not exceed 5000 in number. The "Suri" reported by Lyth [1947] is not the same Suri to be dealt with next below. For the present, it must be considered as a possible distinct Surma language. The people number about 2000. 2

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1 I would like to express my appreciation to Harvey Hoekstra for his invaluable support and aid in my work on Surma peoples and languages.

2 Lyth's Suri [Lyth 1947] presents a problem. He locates the people at "Koma", at Zilmamu, ten miles northeast of Zilmamu, and some still further north in Ethiopia, and a bit to the northwest on the Boma plateau in Sudan. They are said to number about 2000. He says the language is about 30-40% like Tirma in "radical connections", and very much the same items are also shared by Murle (Murle-Tirma 25%).

The people seem very similar culturally to the "other Suri" further south. They are said to have cattle [op. cit. 106, 112], practice cicatrisation, and wearing of lip-plates (both round and triangular—I noted triangular ones among the "other Suri", but Turton did not see them among the Mursi), body-painting and much ornamentation [111]. Stick-fighting is frequent [112]. Age-sets exist [110]. None of this is inconsistent with either the "other Suri" or the Bale, except for keeping of cattle—not found among the Bale. The photographs of people [113, 115] show no obvious differences either with "other Suri" or Bale.

With regards to the language, in addition to the comments above, Lyth's only useful further remarks are that the k-prefix in the first person of verbs is found (see under discussion of isomorphs below); initial a- is omitted to form imperatives, as in Murle, but that pronouns, plurals, etc. are different. The further likening of Suri to a "mutilated Murle" [113-114] similar to American as a "cacaphonous" English is less than useless. Lexically, the few items found in Tucker and Bryan [1966] show items similar to all other Surma languages, with no clear trend discernible. For the present one must consider Lyth's Suri as still another Surma language until more data is available.
Suri is a dialect cluster which includes rather homogeneous local varieties: Chai, Tirma, Tid (all on the Sudan border southwest of Maji) and Suri proper (of the mission station area at Lemu). The self-name is tuga-suri 'mouth-of Suri' and the people number 15-20,000.

3. Forest zone: Majang, known to outsiders as Mesengo. Self-name of the people is majan (pl. majanir) and of the language ato-majanero-ongo 'mouth-Majangir-of'. About 20,000 people scattered through the high forest belt from Dembidolo to the Erbu River in western Ethiopia.

4. Omo River: The Mursi, numbering 5-6,000, are an eastern outlier of the Suri, living in the enclave between the Omo and Mago Rivers. The Bodi, to the north of the Mursi, and the Tishena, west of Bodi-Mursi, make up the Me'en (self-name: tuk-te-me'en 'mouth of Me'en'), totalling perhaps 40,000. The Kwegu are scattered in small settlements along the Omo River. One group south of the Mursi is known as Muguji; all seem to use the self-name toko-kwegoi, or toko k'oyu 'mouth of Kwegu'. They are known to outsiders as Yidinit or Nyidi, and total a few hundred. Sometimes refer to Kwegu-Muguji as "Omo caste peoples" because they are segregated by neighbors as "unclean" for eating hippo flesh, and for other reasons. Finally, the Omo Murle--mandarec, nandarec, aiba murle--are a few hundred individuals living among the Nyangatom on the lower Omo. The language (small sample provided by Ivo Strecker, personal communication, 1974) seems rather divergent from Sudanese Murle, but there can be little doubt that the Omo Murle are emigrants from Sudan.

Culturally, the Surma-speaking peoples are classed by Murdock [1959:172, 329] as Nilotes (Didinga, Murle, Suri, Mursi, Me'en, Zilmamu), and Pre-Nilotes (Majang, Olam). This corresponds mainly to a division between cattle-keepers (Didinga, Murle--except Ngalam, Suri, Mursi, Bodi, Omo Murle) and others (Bale, Majang, Tishena, and Kwegu-Muguji). I am not sure about Olam and Zilmamu. All are hoe agriculturalists, and hunting, gathering, and fishing are important supplements. The Suri (including Mursi) claim stick-fighting as a distinctive cultural trait, e.g. separating them from the Bodi. Most or all remove the lower incisors, and the Bale, Mursi, Suri, and Me'en women wear lip-plates.

The historical movement of the Surma-speaking peoples has been from the Nile valley upward into the foothills of the Ethiopian plateau. For example, the Mursi and Omo Murle clearly represent relatively recent intrusions (based on relative linguistic homogeneity with the main bodies of Suri and Murle to the west). The Majang probably moved into their forest zone from the south, i.e. the Boma Plateau, now Murle territory [Stauder 1971:1].

The "Kerre", considered by Tucker and Bryan [1956:91] as possibly being Surma-speakers, are in reality the Kara, an offshoot of the Omotic-speaking Hamer, speaking a dialect of Hamer.

There have been persistent reports of a people called "Mekeyir",

13
living among the Majang near Gecha, but speaking a different language. Stauder [1970:109] refers to "Mikair" clans among the Majang, said to have been absorbed from the Sheko. Harvey Hoekstra provided a small sample of the language of the Mekeyir, living in a settlement near Gecha in Ilubabor Province [personal communication, January 1977]. Although Mekeyir shows about 22% commonality in basic lexicon with Majang, it shows no more than 11%, against any other Surma language, and up to 16% against Omotic languages. The remaining word-stock seems to be independent of Omotic.

Stauder says that the "Mikair" are noted by the Majang for being nomadic and preferring hunting to agriculture. In view of their anomalous language, they may indeed represent survivors of a former hunting-gathering population of the area. As such, they may provide important clues to the ethnohistory of southwest Ethiopia.

2. Phonology

The consonantal system of Surma is relatively simple. The scarcity of fricatives is striking. The following may be taken as basic:

(1) p t c k (?)
    b d j g
    B D j
    m n n η
    I, r
    w y

In Murle, fricatives v and δ occur but j does not. Voiceless allophones f and θ occur. According to Hostetter, [ms.] θ and ē generally occur before voiceless suffixes. Similarly x and η occur as allophones of k and g intervocalically. Tucker and Bryan [1966:371] state that ? occurs only finally and sporadically. Although Tucker and Bryan list dental t, d and alveolar t, d, and William Welmers [personal communication] reports that Hostetter recorded the four-way contrast also, (plus a dental η !) Hostetter [ms.] does not mention it. Tucker and Bryan also give s, z and h, but these are not reported by other sources, including myself.

In Mursi, in addition to the basic consonants above, fricative s occurs in free variation with θ [Turton and Bender 1976:538].

Majang has the basic set except j. No fricative occurs distinctively, but the phones s, j, s, v, c are in free alternation. Intervocalically, p is sometimes represented by fricative θ. Cerulli [1948] gives also p′ (probably B′), f, s, j, but none of the latter are phonemic.

Ricci [1975] gives the basic pattern for Bodi plus t, s, z, b, g, nd, ng, h, and p (the latter only intersyllabic), except that B and D
are missing. My own records indicate that B and D do occur; also s, z, and h. I analyze bʰ and gʰ as bw and gw respectively (and similarly mw, dw, Bw, etc.; perhaps bwi- is to be analyzed as bui-) and gɣ and kɣ as gi- and ki- respectively. Similarly, nd and ng are sequences. I recorded no ts/s contrast, but did find ejectives p', t', c', k': these may be due to Amharic influence. Double consonants do occur. Some processes are s → θ (rare), d → δ, b → β, p → φ (all three intervocalically).

Muguji is recorded only in notes taken by Ivo Strecker and me in 1973, and extensive data collected for me by Jean Lydall in 1974. Besides the consonants of the chart in (1), we recorded t', c', k', Q, z, and h. Notice the asymmetry in the fricatives: z and J occur (5 is found only in loan words). Lydall also records x, but this may be an allophone of k intervocalically.

The five-vowel system (i, e, a, o, u, ) seems to be basic.

Tucker and Bryan [1966:370] state that Lyth transcribes only five vowels for Murle, but Lyth [1971] uses eight—adding œ = œ and e, œ—though it is unclear whether he means them to be phonemic. Tucker also adds i and o, but is uncertain of the status of the ten vowels. Hostetter has seven vowels; all but one occur short and long, e· being always long. Tucker and Bryan say length is of little significance; Lyth frequently records long vowels for Tucker's short ones. My own notes represent a bare beginning. I have a maximal system of eight vowels (the usual seven plus œ) and distinctive length, but this is probably too etic. Diphthongs ai, au, oi, ci, ei, occur, the last two being problematic.

Mursi is analyzed by Turton and Bender as having only five vowels and no distinctive length: length seems to be correlated with tone and stress.

Majang has an assymetrical six-vowel system with o lacking—no convincing example of o/o contrast could be found. The symmetry could be restored if ε is considered as corresponding to Murle œ. Length in vowels is important: minimal or near-minimal pairs are found for all contrasts. Cerulli [1948] gives five vowels only and states that he has no examples of intermediate vowels.

For Bodi, Ricci [1975] gives five vowels. My notes seem to support this, although more study needs to be done on the possibility of e/ε and o/o contrasts. Length seems not to be distinctive.

Muguji presents a similar picture: my and also Lydall's notes indicate a likely five-vowel system with residual doubts about tense/lax in mid vowels.

Regarding tone, Tucker and Bryan [1966:371] mention three levels plus falling and rising for Murle. Turton and Bender have three levels plus
falling in Mursi. It is doubtful that all of these are significant in either case. In both cases, if tone exists, it would seem to function grammatically and not lexically. I could find no convincing examples of lexical or grammatical tone in Majang. If tone exists, it appears to be correlated with stress and/or length. The same remark applies to Bodi and Muguji. For Bodi, Ricci [1975] shows examples of contrastive "accent", e.g. sisò 'bee', sisò 'wasp'. Length ("gemination") of consonants seems to be correlated with stress in Murle [Tucker and Bryan 1966:371]. I found no examples of convincing contrasts in Majang, though a few lexical items seem to have inherent geminates, and geminates also arise morphophonemically.

In summary, Surma has a relatively simple phonological pattern. The consonant system is very much like that of Nilotic, except for the lack of a dental/alveolar contrast and the presence of implosive stops B, D, and perhaps G. The absence of fricatives in both groups is striking—except as noted: * most widespread in Surma. The vowel system of Surma is much simpler than that of Nilotic: five basic vowels occur throughout, plus lax ɛ, ɔ and perhaps ɐ in some cases. This contrasts with Nilotic's plentitude of quality contrasts and the important dichotomy labelled variously as lax-tense, breathy-hard, etc. (The phonetic nature of this contrast is still being investigated; see Tucker and Bryan [1966:403ff.], Lydall [1976:397ff.], Jacobson [this volume]). Whereas both lexical and grammatical tone are pervasive in Nilotic, only grammatical tone seems to be found in Surma, and it is not so functionally crucial as in Nilotic. Vowel length is found in both Nilotic and Surma, but once again, Nilotic has it more clearly and carrying greater functional load.

In terms of sub-grouping, phonological systems provide little help at this point. Majang and Mursi seem to form one set (Majang has no ʃ, Mursi has both ʃ and s, Majang has an extra vowel ɛ), Bodi and Muguji another (both have z and h, Bodi has s, Muguji has ʃ, both probably have five-vowel systems and both may have ejectives), and Murle is separate (having fricatives v and ʒ).

\[16\]

3. Grammar

With much better documentation of Majang, the grammatical findings of Bender [1976] need considerable revisions (and some other corrections are required). Space limitations preclude presenting these changes here. A summary of proposed Surma isomorphs follows.

I counted a "grammeme" (grammatical feature) as an isomorph if it occurred in three or more of my sample Surma languages (Mursi, Murle, Bodi, Muguji, Majang—covering all significant varieties except the poorly-
attested Olam-Bale-Zilmamu cluster) and in no more than two other Sahelian families or groups as isomorphs (i.e. isolated occurrences in a family are o.k., but not in a majority of the languages of a family).

It happens that with the changes, one isomorph of Bender [1976] is lost (no. 3: possessive in -u, now attested only for Murle and a trace in Bodi), while another is strengthened (no. 89 below).

14. n feminine, found in Majang ( -ŋaik ), Mursi ( -ŋaŋha ), Bodi ( -ŋūnto ), and Muguji ( -ŋaŋŋa ). Also found in Didinga, E. 7 Merarit, E. 9 Nuer, and in F Bagirmi, and I Gumuz.

15. m masculine, found in Majang ( -moik ), Mursi ( -mamai ), Bodi ( -maiko ), and Muguji ( -jumo ). Also in E. 8 Daju, B. Kanuri, C Berta, and I Gumuz.

52. 'when?' having m ... n or w ... n, found in Murle ( waŋa, for past actions), Mursi ( mfnąŋ ), Bodi ( mınęŋ ). Also in Didinga, and in E. 9 Anywa, G Berta.

66. Verbal noun in -Vn, found in all five sample languages (omitted from chart on p. 446 for Majang, although counted in the statement on p. 468). Also in C Maba, E. 6 Temein, E. 9 Nuer.

89. Negative in n, found in all sample languages ( -n in Majang, ŋan in Murle, ŋa in Mursi, ane in Bodi, kana 'not yet' in Muguji). Also in C Maba, H Kunama, E. 6 Temein, E. 9 Nuer.

In the above, the numerals such as E. 4 refer to groups under E: East Sudanic (see the first page of this article). F, G, H and I refer to other families (Central Sudanic, Berta, Kunama, Koman).

Note that on p. 471 a seventh isomorph is added as follows:

kv- in verb conjugation first person singular and plural, occurs in Mursi, Murle, Bodi (and Chai, Tirma, Tishena, Didinga), but not as far as known in Muguji. The k- particle of the Majang verb conjugation, occurring in all persons except third, might be related to this kv (from my own unpublished grammatical notes).

Mursi and Bodi show up on all six isomorphs, the others on four each.

Some striking similarities show up in syntax and need investigation, e.g. the plethora of relatives and their parallel uses in Majang and Murle (and I suspect in Bodi also).

Finally, turning to Table 2 of Bender [1976], and counting how many grammemes are shared by pairs of Surma languages, we find that Murle-Mursi-Bodi share about 18 (actually 17 Murle-Mursi, Murle-Bodi, 19 Mursi-Bodi), Majang-Muguji has 10, and both Majang and Muguji have about 10 against the
other three (7, Mj.-Mrs., 9 Mrl.-Mug., 10 Mrs.-Mug., Mj.-Bo., 12 Bo.-Mug., Mj.-Mrl.). This suggests a grouping:

(3)

Majang  Muguji  Murle  Bodi  Mursi

For further details and examples of grammatical features in Surma languages, see Bender forthcoming.

4. Lexicon

A preliminary lexicostatistical study of the Surma languages was carried out, using Majang, Murle, Omo Murle, Mursi, Bale, Zilmamu, Olam, Kwegu, Muguji, and Bodi. In addition, Mekeyir was included on the assumption that it is a Surma language. Only Murle was chosen from Murle-Didinga-Boya, only Bodi from Tishena-Bodi, and only Mursi from Mursi-Suri-Tirma-Chai in view of these previously obtained figures: Didinga-Boya 96%, Murle-Didinga 81%, Tishena-Bodi 84%, Mursi-Suri 87%, Mursi-Chai 92%, Tirma-Suri 91%.

(4) TABLE: percents of presumed cognates: Surma group plus Mekeyir

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<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Mekeyir</th>
<th>Murle</th>
<th>Omo Murle</th>
<th>Mursi</th>
<th>Bale</th>
<th>Zilmamu</th>
<th>Olam</th>
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All of these figures were based on at least 71 comparisons (and usually more than 90) except for Olam, for which data is minimal (30-33 comparisons possible). As noted earlier, Mekeyir presents a problem. It looks like a case of borrowing up to the level of "hybridization" with Majang, and this is further reinforced by the Omotic appearance of the grammar as mentioned above.

The grouping which emerges is as follows:

(5)

This result is not significantly different from the earlier one I obtained in Bender [1971:192]. Majang is still most divergent. Murle-Zilmamu (all I then had for that branch) is coordinate with the rest. The rest is the same (with Muguji now added).

5. Surma Isoglosses

In the following, reference will be made to the nine branches of Sahelian identified on the first page. In addition, two branches of Afro-Asiatic will be mentioned: Cushitic and Omotic (the latter still called by the diehards "West Cushitic"). For details of the classification, see Bender [(ed.) 1976], especially pages 3 through 4, and Chapters 1, 4, and 13, the Overviews of Families.

The very best isoglosses are:

25. eye occurs as *kEbEr or *kErb in 9 of 10 sample languages (languages used in lexicostatistics) and nowhere in other Sahelian or Cushitic-Omotic languages.

(E represents front vowel; Majang has ta·ma 'eye').

28. fire occurs as *g0 in 9 of 10 sample languages and nowhere else in Sahelian or Omotic

(O is back vowel; Majang has ma·D, perhaps a loan from Nilotic *ma·c)

Also very good are:

19. dog *orVs in 7 of 10 sample languages; not found elsewhere

(V an unknown vowel; Majang has warr, Kwegu has boho, Muguji, kiyane, this last a loan from Omotic *kana).

79. stone *Be, *be, found in 8 of 10 Surma languages, but also Undu (Berta) has be·le, Omotic has forms like melo, pa1o (Majang has giDe, Olam item is not known).

Also quite good are the following (summarized):

4. belly *kieŋ 8/10; not in Sahelian, hi·na, ka·ni in Ometo.

9. blood *Bej 4/10; *nab 4/10; Komo has baŋ; weak similarities in Cushitic and Omotic.

18. die *er, Majang rer, 8/10; not in Sahelian; Afar-Saho, Highland East Cushitic re, le

36. hair *Em 5/10; *CVr(Vs) 4/10; not in Sahelian, weak similarities in Dasenech, (Cushitic), Dizi (Omotic).
42. I *anEtV 9/10; found in E. 4, E. 9 as a·n, note an·c in Burun (E. 9); Ari ita, Sheko neta (both Omotic).

59. nose *vŋ, 5/10; *giron, *jiron 4/10; weak similarities in E. 4, none in Cushitic or Omotic.

85. thou *inE(ta) 9/10; anta in B Tubu, E. 1 and E. 9 have *in; Cushitic *at, Ari anna.

87. tongue *(a)Ka(t) 9/10; E. 1, 4, 9, G, I have forms with kal-; not found in controls.

90. two *ram(an) 6/10; not found in other Sahelian; widespread *Nama in Cushitic and Omotic.

It is disturbing that Majang is deviant on all four best isoglosses and also on 'belly, blood, two', but it agrees on the other six. Majang is clearly the most divergent Surma language lexically.

Of the four strongest isoglosses proposed in Bender [1976:471], only one survives: 'tongue'. The others are found too widespread in Nilo-Saharan. On the other hand, four which were lacking in Majang have now been reinstated: 'eye, fire, road, stone'. Of seven other near-misses, four have been added: 'breast, die, tail, woman' and three rejected: 'black, hear, tree'. (Not all of these are given above--some are rather weak.)

For a fuller discussion, including loan words, see Bender [forthcoming].

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