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Sedentarization of Nomadic Shifting Cultivators : The Majangir of Lowland Ethiopia

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Sedentarization of Nomadic Shifting Cultivators: The Majangir of Lowland Ethiopia

Ren'ya Sato
Osaka University

ABSTRACT

Based on a case study of the twentieth century history of the Majangir, shifting cultivators living in Southwestern Lowland Ethiopia, this article examines what strategies and tactics nomadic shifting cultivators adopt to adapt to new sedentary lives. Special focus is on the changing process of settlement patterns, subsistence, inter-ethnic relations and political stability since the early-20th century. Until the mid-20th century, the Majangir had lived in scattered, small settlements in forest, coping with various threats, such as raids from other groups living in the savanna, slave traders in Highland Ethiopia, and internal conflict among clans. At the end of 1970s, the Majangir had accepted the “villagization” program promoted by the Ethiopian Socialist regime. Although there was an expectation of peace and improved lives, behind their acceptance were critical circumstances like conflicts with the central government and neighboring groups that had continued after sedentarization. To cope with such difficulties, the Majangir continued to occupy their niches by employing what can be termed ‘forest tactics,’ that differed from neighboring groups, and so have survived up to the present. Although they changed some aspects of their lifestyle flexibly according to altered environmental conditions, it can be asserted that their fundamental ‘forest tactics,’ which might be deeply rooted in their culture, have persisted even after the Majangir adopted a sedentary life.

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to elucidate the strategies and tactics adopted by nomadic shifting cultivators to cope with sedentarization, by describing the changing process of settlements and subsistence that shifting cultivators living in the forests of southwestern Ethiopian forest have experienced during the past century.

The Majangir (sing. Majang), now inhabit densely forested areas at the borders of the Gambela Region, the Oromiya Region and the SNNPR (the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Region) of the Democratic Republic

of Ethiopia. Until the 1970s they lived in small and dispersed settlements comprising several households, which were abandoned frequently to relocate elsewhere. However, they experienced rapid and great change under “villagization” that was initiated by the Ethiopian Socialist government (DERG) from the end of the 1970s. A key focus of this article is the process of change from a nomadic to sedentary life. The article examines the change and continuity of the Majangir’s subsistence and society, to elucidate what was changed and what remained the same in their lives before and after “villagization”.

Peoples engaged in shifting cultivation or hunting and gathering under conditions of low population density are often characterized by a high mobility. Membership of settlements is often loose, consisting of *ad hoc* relationships that frequently renew it, although the basic principle of settlement membership stems from kinship. Why societies adopt such a lifestyle is a classical problem in anthropology. One explanation for the cause of high mobility is the perspective of rational resource use. For example, a recursive fallow system of shifting cultivation, wherein people abandon agricultural fields after a few years’ cultivation and clear the area again when vegetation and soil fertility have recovered, is viewed as a rational way to which utilize natural productivity and achieve sustainable environmental use.

As long as subsistence activities constitute individual behavior, rationality must be understood not only in terms of the sustainability of natural environments, but also labor efficiency. Shifting cultivation is often regarded as an extensive and inefficient form of agriculture, but it represents a particular perspective on land productivity. Regarding labor productivity, shifting cultivation has proved to be a superior system compared to sedentary farming or flooded-field cultivation of rice (Dove 1985). In shifting cultivation, insofar as cultivation is continued on the same field, the growth of weeds increases, and consequently the labor input becomes higher. Hence, from the viewpoint of labor productivity, the best way is to shift fields at the time when the increasing costs of the labor input by the perennial cultivation increase more than the labor costs of slashing and felling trees in the new forest. The rationality of shifting fields can be examined using a quantitative model, such as the optimal foraging theory (Keegan 1986).

However, some questions remain. The rationality of the subsistence activities described above proposes that they sustain small-scale populations in forests. The condition under which the population size grows could require different types of behavior, such as land-intensive agriculture at the expense of low labor-productivity. In small-scale societies, such as those of shifting cultivators, do people sustain a small population size consciously? For what reason do people abandon settlements, and move elsewhere? What conditions restrict their behavior?

This article examines such problems by using the key terms “sustainable strategy” and “forest-living tactics.” The author proposes a sustainable strategy among them, as a kind of conditioned strategy through which people can select multiple tactics according to the different conditions of the natural environment,

inter-ethnic relations, inter-kin group relations, and economic circumstances. If such a sustainable strategy becomes the behavioral norm to adapt to and cope with changing conditions, environmental and other change will make people to adopt the most effective tactics for their conditions. The author attempts to elucidate the sustainable strategy of the Majangir by describing the relationships between the conditions they have experienced since the early-20th century and the tactics they have adopted.

First, let us connect the concept of sustainable strategy as a conditioned strategy to the issue of mobility and sedentism. If mobile and sedentary, or dispersed and concentrated settlement patterns are selected by peoples according to their environmental conditions, then what are the important factors that make peoples determine their behavior? Change of natural environment, such as climate and vegetation, could be nominated as such factors. However, if we regard the issue in the relatively short time-scale of 100 years, the change of social conditions might be more important than that of the natural environment.

Southwestern Ethiopia, the focus of this article, is inhabited by various peoples with different population sizes, different cultures, and various modes of subsistence. The Majangir, surrounded by many different groups of various sizes and cultures, are one of them (Figure 1). The feature that characterizes each ethnic group, such as living in a forest, on the savanna, in either lowlands or highlands,

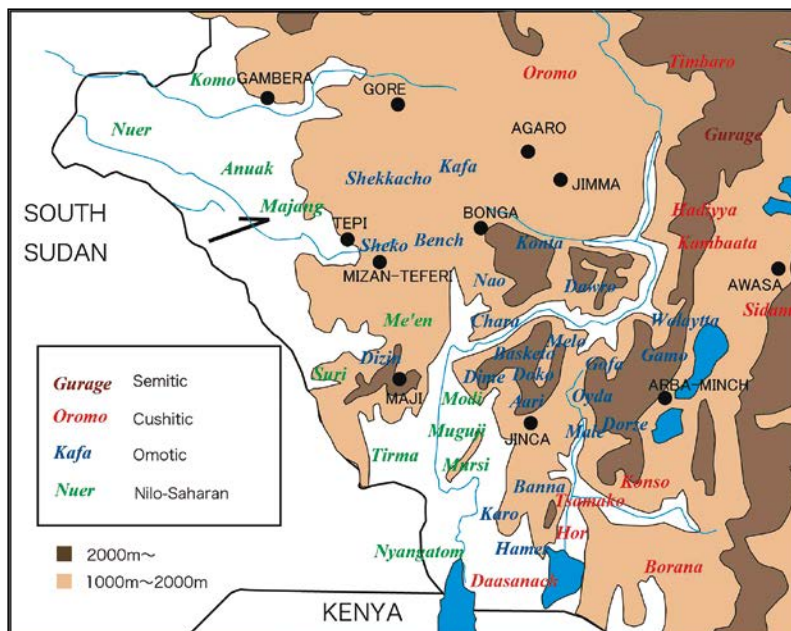


Figure 1 Distribution of ethnic groups in southwestern Ethiopia and the habitat of the Majangir.

Source: Made by the author

in dispersed settlements or collective inhabitations, conducting intensive or extensive agriculture, the existence or non-existence of pastoralism or hunting-gathering, is a niche that each group has acquired through their past and present inter-ethnic relations, and is a result of the balance of power formed through their past transactions. And those niches may change according to the change of other groups' behavior or politico-social conditions. The Majangir have also changed their lifestyle, from dispersed and mobile to collective habitation, according to the change of their surrounding conditions. The change of political conditions in the central government has also influenced the inter/intra-ethnic power balance, and people have changed their behavior to cope with these new conditions. This includes severe inter-group conflicts as an important factor.

In the following sections the traditional mode of subsistence, inter-ethnic relationships, and settlement pattern of the Majangir are first outlined. Then an attempt is made to reconstruct their settlement history and clarify the factors that have influenced their nomadic settlement pattern. Subsequently, the process of "villagization" and their way of coping with the policy is described and whether the process is their tactical response to the change of conditions is examined. The change of conditions implies especially a change of social factors, such as the inter-group power balance and various kinds of social anxiety. Attention must also be paid to unchanging aspects alongside the changing conditions. The author proposes that "forest-living tactics" is one such aspect. It is a further aim of this article to demonstrate such "unchanging aspects".

RECONSTRUCTING A MOVING HISTORY OF PEOPLE AND SETTLEMENTS

1) The Majangir and their Forest

The Majangir are an ethnic group with a population of less than 35,000, which belongs to the Surmic group of the Nilo-Saharan linguistic family. Of the Surmic peoples, the Majangir inhabit the densely forested northernmost area, located, at the border between the southwestern Ethiopian highland and lowland (Figures 1, 2). The Majangir are the only northern member among the Surmic groups, and are linguistically relatively isolated from others (Unseth 1991). Although the details of their ethnic history are vague, they are said to have settled in the present areas after migrating from southern areas where other Surmic groups live (Stauder 1970).

They inhabit an area of some 10,000 km², at an altitude of 500–1600m above sea level extending from the south of Gurafarda to the west of Metu. Most of the area's vegetation consists of broad-leaved forest of tall trees, particularly *Aningeria altissima*, *Celtis zenkeri*, *Cordia abyssinica*, *Baphia abyssinica*, *Lecanodiscus fraxinifolius*, and *Antiaris toxicaria* among others (Sato 2014). The Majangir have slashed and felled trees to make settlements and shifting fields, and they have been engaged in honey collecting, hunting and logging (Photos 1, 2, 3, 4).

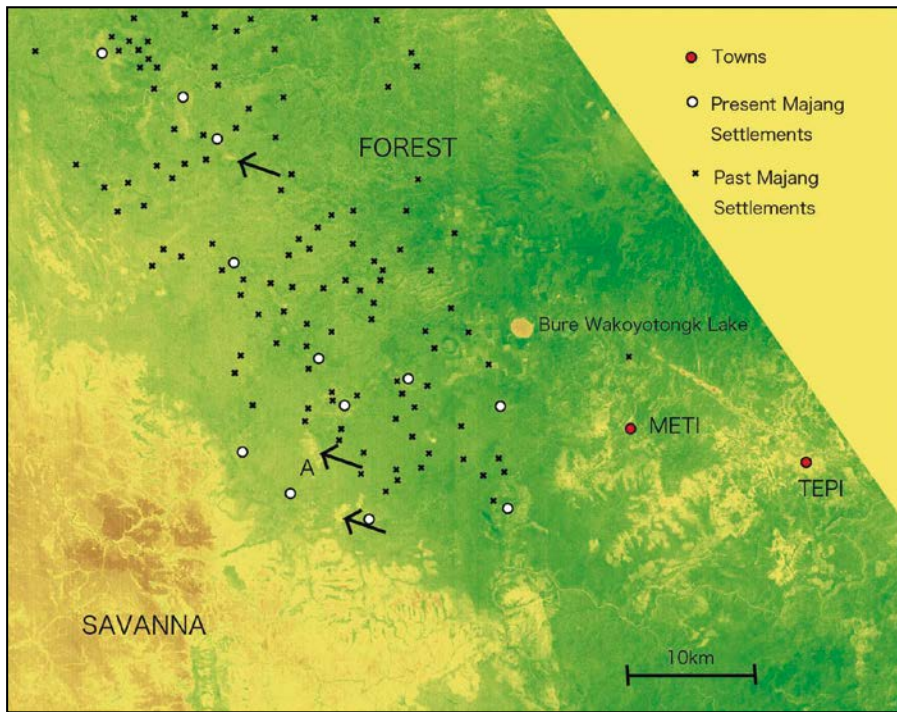


Figure 2 Distribution and vegetation of the Majang settlements.
Source: Surveyed and mapped by the author.



Photo 1 A shifting field in the forest. (Photograph by the author, 1995)



Photo 2 Majang male slashing his shifting field. (Photograph by the author, 2001)



Photo 3 Small settlement along Godare River. (Photograph by the author, 1992)



Photo 4 Bushbuck hunting. (Photograph by the author, 1994)

Though there is little information about the Majangir from before the first half of the 20th century, piecemeal information about them was published in the British regional journal *Sudan Notes and Records*, in the early-1920s. A brief, anonymous article in that journal introduces information about the Majangir, as narrated by neighboring Anywaa informants (“the Ujang” in the following citation means the Majangir in Anywaa language; “the Galla” means Oromo people, probably including other Ethiopian highlanders, and “the Anuak” means Anywaa.):

The area they inhabit is covered with dense forest—so dense is it that my informants say the people go crouching and creeping through it. There are no paths, and it is seldom that they ever cut a way through anywhere. The sun never penetrates the forests, and Anuak say the Ujang would die if they had to live outside in the open air and winds of the plains, exposed to the sun.

The Anuak say that in physique the Ujang are similar to themselves, but usually of a somewhat lighter colour. The Ujang wear no clothes or skins, but both men and women often wear small “fore and afts” made of bark. They take out the three centre teeth in their lower jaws. Instead of using skins for sleeping mats etc., they strip large pieces of bark from trees and make mats from these, probably pounding the bark until it become soft and pliable as is done elsewhere in East Africa.

They own a number of hunting dogs by means of which they hunt and kill wild pig that abound in the forests. They are armed with spears and also have a certain number of rifles which they have captured from the Galla, but they seem to make little use of these rifles. They apparently do not own bows and arrows. Elephant roam through the forest and are slain by means of heavily weighted spears thrown or dropped from trees. They formerly had no use for ivory but now buy honey and salt with it from the Anuak. The Abyssinians also now try to get an ivory tribute from them. The Galla leave both the Ujang and elephant undisturbed as they dislike the former for throwing spears from tree-tops and the latter for charging them at very close quarters in dense forest.

The Ujang people occupy the low country at the foot of the mountains between Olam (Lat. 6°40', Long 34°55') northwards to within one day of Gambeila. They are reported to be a numerous and peaceful people but when necessary they can protect themselves from the Galla. They have a distinct language of their own. Their largest village which extends for some 5 to 6 miles is called Odari and is situated on the river of this name which later becomes, in the Anuak country, the Gila River.

Wild coffee grows profusely in the Ujang forests. The Ujang themselves make no use of the coffee berry, but drink a concoction made by boiling the leaves of the coffee shrub mixed with a little salt. The Anuak of Gog District, however, collect a large quantity of coffee berries from the Ujang District and also buy them from the Ujang in exchange for salt. (Anon 1922: 170)

The description in the article shows that the notable feature of the Majangir in those days was living in the forest where other groups, including Ethiopian highlanders, could not enter easily, and that the Majangir did not approach other groups positively, but severely lashed back against invaders who came to steal or raid. At least, they were regarded doing so by neighboring people. These features can also be discerned from narratives of the Majang people themselves, as will be illustrated below.

There is also information on the Majangir in the 1920s in an itinerary by Arnold Hodson, the then British consul and who traveled the southern borderland of Ethiopia ("the Masango" or "the Masongo" in the following citation means the Majangir, and "the Yambo" means the Anywaa.):

I told the officer in charge of my escort of my intention. He was much averse to my going, telling me that I should find the forest impassable, and the Masango natives hostile and treacherous. However, I persisted in my scheme, and left the next morning. I found the officer was correct in what he had said—the country was almost impassable. I have seldom seen a more unpleasant tract of forest. Pushing through the bush, we found ourselves covered with small and ferocious ants, which crawled down our necks, and bit us so unmercifully that we came out in spots

exactly like chicken-pox. The forests were awe-inspiring.

(Hodson 1929: 153)

We traveled down the river-bank, and in the forest we saw a small Masongo boy, who promptly fled as soon as he caught sight of us. Quite natural that he should run away, for poachers or hunters invariably try to catch any people they see, to sell as slaves, or, if they cannot catch them, they shoot them. The reader will remember that when I captured the poaching caravan, I found amongst other things a pair of slave-chains.

(Hodson 1929: 217)

As an example of this barbarity, the following story may be of interest. About two years before, four Swahilis and two Abyssinians came to the Gilo. There they found two Masongo gathering honey. One they considered too big to sell, so they killed him, the other they took with them to Maji, where he was sold as a slave. A year later, these same men returned to the Gilo, and slept in a Masongo village near Dildilla Waha (The Bridge of God). One night, they found themselves surrounded by natives who said, 'We always treated you well, yet you murdered one of our people and sold the other. Now we are going to kill you!' Thereupon they murdered the lot—with the exception of one man, who escaped. He got back to Maji to tell the tale.

(Hodson 1929: 217–218)

The Yambo informed me that they were not friendly with the Masongo, and that when they could they captured the Masong women and children. At the same time they seemed to me to have a good deal of respect for the tribe as fighters.

(Hodson 1929: 223)

The primary type of subsistence of the Majangir is shifting cultivation, but they engage in multiple subsistence activities that exploit various kinds of forest resources. One of the most important among them is honey collecting for external trade and as a source of cash (Photos 5, 6). Adult males have multiple territories (*jang*) for honey collecting and hunting in forests and on the savanna, and put beehives (*daane*) in the branches of tall trees. They place these hives after considering the tree species with flowers that are sources of pollen. Because the harvest time for honey depends on the flowering season of "honey plants", they have several territories for collection with different vegetation thereby ensuring a year-round harvest. Many Majang males have more than 60 beehives.

The Majangir also engage in hunting near settlements and *jang*. At present, game hunted in forests consists mainly of red river hogs (*Potamochoerus porcus*), bushbucks (*Tragelaphus sylvaticus*), and duikers (*Sylvicapra grimmia*). Formerly they used often to hunt elephants (*Loxodonta africana*), but their population decreased rapidly in the 1980s and they have been found but rarely since the 1990s. The Majangir hunted with guns during the 1990s, owing the influence of Ethiopian civil wars in the 1980s, when guns diffused among them, but except for



Photo 5 Majang male climbing a tree to collect honey. (Photograph by the author, 2000)



Photo 6 Majang males making beehives (*daane*) in the forest. (Photograph by the author, 1995)

that time they hunted with traps and spears, and used dogs. They lacked cattle and sheep until recently, and their main source of animal protein is hunted game and the chicken eggs.

Traditional settlements before sedentarization were small, consisting of only several households. They cleared the forest around their own huts for shifting cultivation, and the fields were usually located adjacent to those of neighbors (Photo 7). Having fields adjacent to those of others was beneficial for preventing intrusions of such pests as birds and forest animals like Anubis baboons and green monkeys,. Spatially, settlements may be viewed as collective shifting fields, including huts.

As described above, the bonds between members in each settlement were *ad hoc*, which made it easy to move to elsewhere after having lived together for several years, although households with kin ties lived together for a relatively longer time than others. Households often move to a settlement where their relatives or friends live, except when settling in an uninhabited part of the forest. This settlement pattern changed greatly after “villagization”, as is demonstrated below.

One factor that influenced settlement size in traditional patterns was the existence of ritual leaders, called *tapa'd* (pl. *tapa*) among their society (Stauder 1971). *Tapa* had the ability to contact the spirits (*walde*) that allegedly inhabited



Photo 7 Majang house and shifting field surrounded by forest. (Photograph by the author, 2001)

the forest and influenced people's destiny. Further, *tapa* were believed to have the ability to keep the peace by conducting rituals. *Tapa* were recognized to have individual abilities, but many belonged to one major clan called *meelanir*. The Majangir have an oral tradition, according to which the ancestors of the *meelanir* clan moved and settled from Maji in the southern area, and the primogenitor was from other ethnic group. However, nothing is certain about this.

People involved in conflicts and violence were believed to make the spirits angry and to meet-up with disaster, hence the powerful *tapa* who could control spirits were believed to have peace-keeping powers. As a result, followers of those *tapa* concentrated in settlements where powerful *tapa* lived, so the size of those settlements tended to increase. Because Majangir society was acephalous, with no political institution to control lineages or clans, the only way to solve conflicts among kin groups or neighbors was by negotiation among themselves; *tapa* therefore wielded exceptional political power to solve conflicts through their supernatural power (Stauder 1972).

2) Reconstructing Settlement History

Since 1997 the author has been conducting research to reconstruct the history of settlement and migration among the Majangir. Through this he has attempted to clarify the "history of individual land": where they made settlements in the vast forest; when and why they abandoned each settlement, and what kind of pattern existed with regard to making and abandoning settlements.

This research is one of the measures to solve the problem described in the first part of this article: what are the immediate causes that decide the movement of shifting cultivators? It takes several years to decades for each settlement to be abandoned. Often it also takes decades for a forest that was previously a settlement to be cleared again once it has been abandoned. Therefore, it is necessary to grasp precisely the trend of each place in the time sequence of decades up to one hundred years. Investigating the causes of settlement abandonment and migration, permits an understanding of the mechanism of settlement dynamics.

First, by interviewing people born or brought up in each place, the author tried to locate all the places where the Majangir had settled at least once in the past, and plot them on topographical maps. "Places where they had settled at least once" can be found only if there is a person who can recall them. It refers to the past that people know directly or at least that they heard about from their parents' generation. Once a settlement is cleared, pioneers or their descendants generally retain a memory of it even long after it has been abandoned. Often such places and their patterns of abandonment and clearance are memorized by the individual or clan along with the name of the pioneers or those of their descendants and friends. In this way settlement history can be traced back to the early- 20th century at most.

The author used topographical maps during interviews. Although most people were not good at reading maps, they could understand the topography depicted on

them when shown some landmarks, such as rivers, hills and mountains, depressions, grasslands in forest, and plains. The author collected names of such places with topographical features as well as names of past settlements, and plotted them on the maps (Photo 8). Meanwhile he chronologized event history to accord with the time of abandonment and clearance of each settlement. Thus a series of spatial distribution of past settlements with time series was constructed.

Figure 3 shows one of the products. It can be seen from the map that settlements cannot be cleared anywhere in the forest, but that there are some locational restrictions. Most settlements have been located near rivers and streams. This is obvious, because water supply is the primary restriction on making a livelihood, but it needs to be considered that possible locations for settlements as well as of shifting fields are only part of the vast forest.

That can be verified using buffer analysis in GIS. Figure 4 is a GIS map that shows the relationship between the distance from rivers and streams and settlements areas that include shifting fields at three periods in the past (1967, 1984 and 1999). The land cover from 1967 was reconstructed by interpretation of aerial photos, that from 1984 by topographical maps, and that from 1999 by a SPOT satellite image. Figure 4 indicates that more than 80 percent of settlements and agricultural fields are located within a kilometer of a river or stream.

Figure 5 shows when each settlement was cleared for the first time by the Majangir. The map demonstrates that more than 70 percent of all past settlements

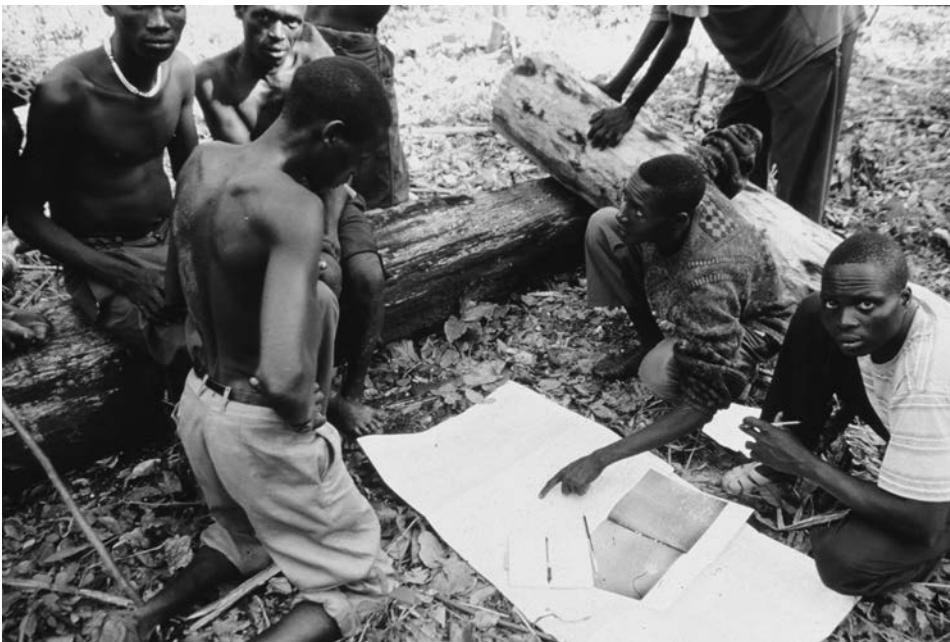


Photo 8 Interviewing with topographic maps and aerial photos. (Photograph by the author, 2001)



Figure 3 Distribution of past and present settlements with pioneer clan names.
 ● present sedentary villages; ○ past sedentary villages that are abandoned at present.
 Source: Surveyed and mapped by the author

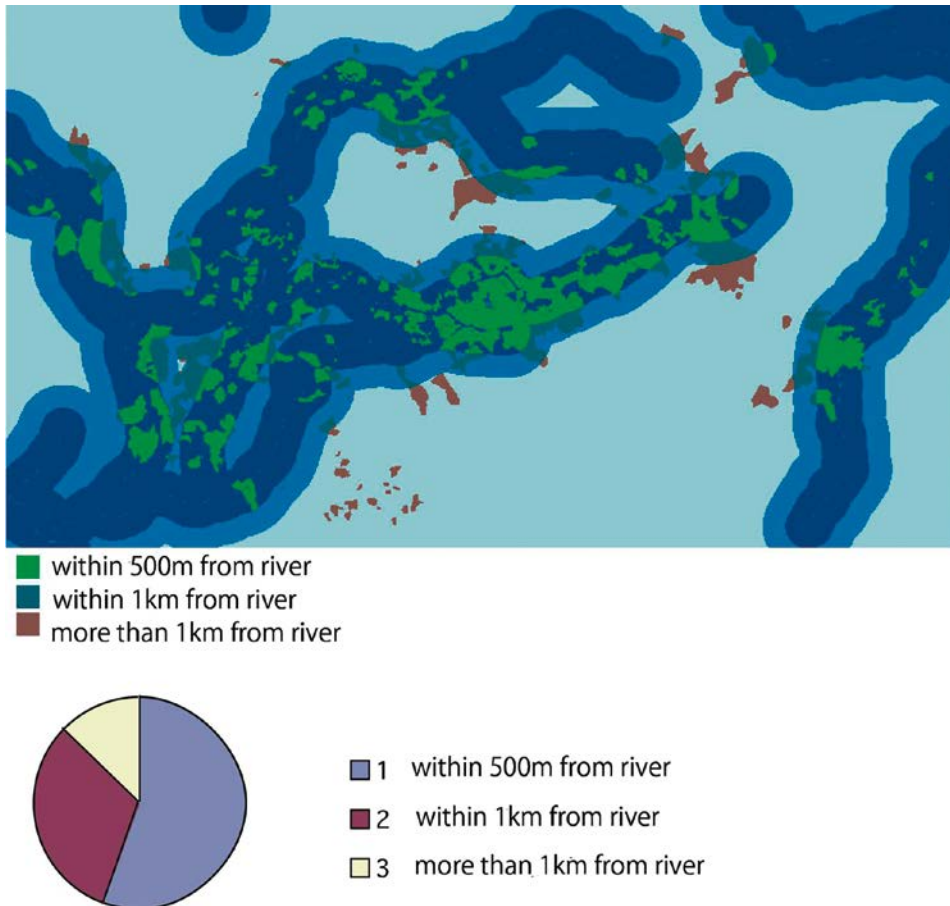


Figure 4 Past and present clearance for settlements and shifting fields in relation to the distance from rivers and streams (buffer analysis in GIS).

Source: Made by the author based on aerial photographs taken by US Air Force in 1967, topographic maps surveyed and mapped by Ethiopian government, and SPOT satellite image in 1999

had already been cleared before at least 1930. Many of these areas have not been inhabited continuously, but abandoned and resettled repeatedly throughout the 20th century. This shows that the Majangir had cleared limited areas that were good for living in the forest and used and abandoned them repeatedly, whereas other areas had been kept as primary forest.

What caused them to abandon these settlements? Life history data on individuals reveal that there are two patterns in their migration. First, only individuals or households move to another land while the settlements from which they transfer persist. This pattern is very common and occurred even after “villagization”. It often happens in connection with shifts of fields or rebuilding of huts (as their traditional huts last only for several years and they shift their huts

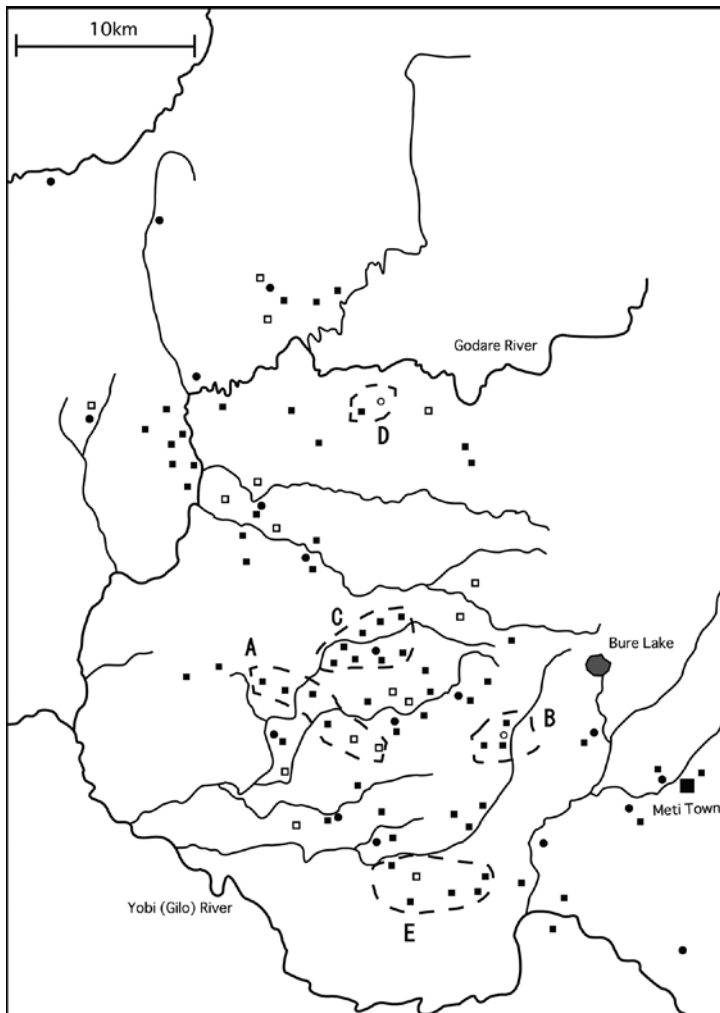


Figure 5 Settlements with periods of first clearance.
 ■ first cleared before 1930; □ first cleared after 1930.
 Source: Surveyed and mapped by the author

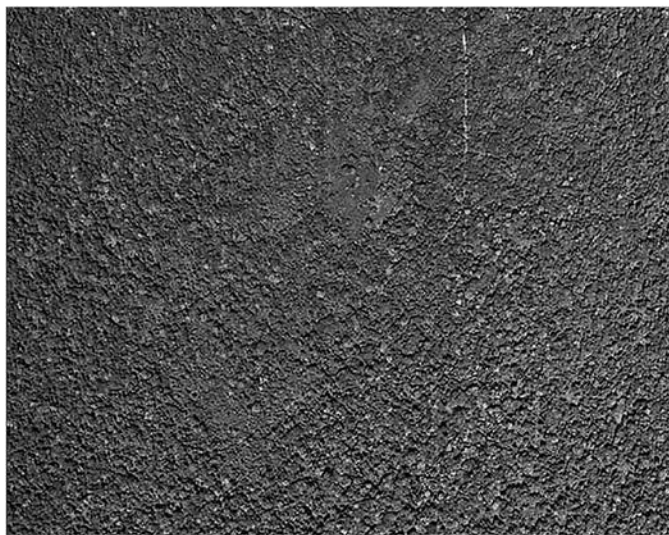
according to their shifts of fields). In such cases, the Majangir often return to areas that they abandoned several years before, and land is used for settlements under a short fallow rotation. This pattern is good for shifting cultivation because the Majangir prefer to slash relatively short fallow vegetation, because it saves labor time compared to clearing long fallow forest.

The second pattern is the abandonment of the settlements themselves, not individual migration. In this pattern, all settlement members abandon the land and move to another place almost simultaneously. Members disperse and each household moves to another settlement together with relatives or friends. In many

cases, abandoned settlements were left uninhabited for decades, and vegetation recovered to tall forest during that time. From the viewpoint of the relationship between forest and its human exploitation, these two patterns can be interpreted as having a dual fallow pattern: short and long fallow (Figure 6).



1967



1996

Figure 6 Aerial photographs showing recovery of vegetation after the abandonment of a small settlement (1967–1999).
Source: Aerial photographs taken by US Air Force in 1967 and taken by JICA in 1999

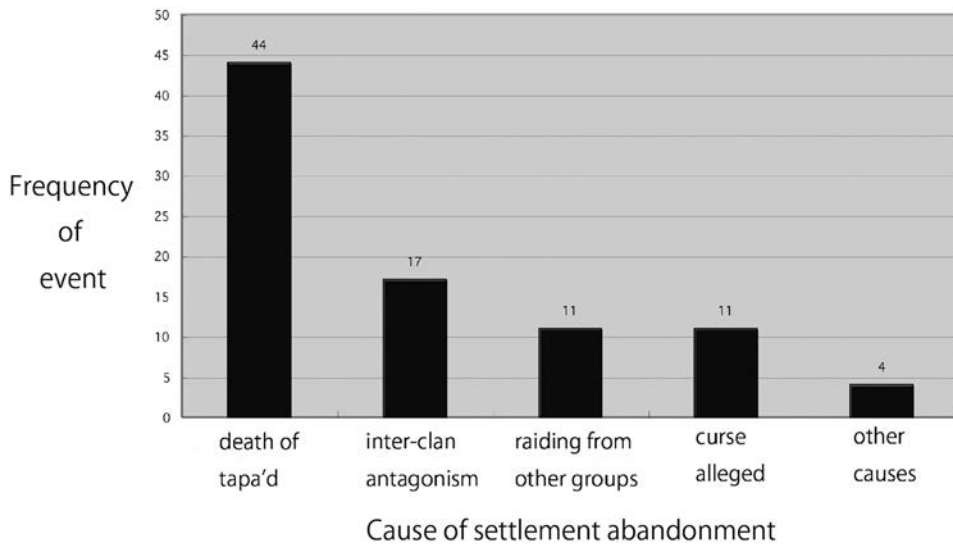


Figure 7 Causes of past abandonments of settlements.
Source: Surveyed by the author

Figure 7 shows causes of the abandonment of past settlements for 87 cases that the author found from interviews. The most frequent cases, “deaths of *tapa*,” mean those in which people abandoned their land following deaths of powerful *tapa*, or the cases in which people moved to follow powerful *tapa* and as a result previous settlements were abandoned. As stated above, a powerful *tapa* could concentrate people and enlarge their settlements with his supernatural power while their deaths caused these large settlements to become uninhabited rapidly. That is, *tapa* influenced concentration and dispersion of population in the traditional settlement pattern of the Majangir.

All of the other causes (inter-clan conflicts, raids from other ethnic groups, and alleged curses) are matters concerning friction between individuals or groups. These matters are fundamentally important to understand the traditional settlement pattern of the Majangir. Therefore cases are detailed cases in the following section.

WARFARE AND EXECRATION AS A RESTRICTION OF SEDENTISM

1) People Escaping from Warfare

Before World War II, one critical threat for the Majangir was raiding by neighboring groups. The Majangir living in the Godare area (corresponding to the area shown in Figure 5) used to suffer especially from raids from the Anywaa, who lived on the western savanna. They would raid Majang settlements to kidnap females and children.

Once having opened a raiding route, they would use it repeatedly for raiding.

Therefore the Majangir would abandon such settlements that were at risk of raids and moved to relatively safer areas. The area A in Figure 5 was abandoned for such a reason in the early-20th century. At that time, a powerful *tapa'd* was killed by the Anywaa during a major raid, and people dispersed to other areas. This area had remained uninhabited until the sons of the murdered *tapa'd*, who had escaped to the C area, resettled there again in the late-1930s. They said that area A was mature forest when they returned there.

Although raids by other ethnic groups were common, threats to the Majangir were not only caused by outsiders. Inter-kin group conflicts caused more settlement abandonments. For example, in the E area of Figure 5, repeated retaliations between two clans (*keeweter* and *keeleyer*) occurred in the 1950s, and, as a consequence, people dispersed and the area became uninhabited. There was a typical custom of blood revenge among the Majangir, according to which they should retaliate against the guilty party or their relatives when a homicide was committed. Homicides, therefore, even when they happened by accident, often developed into uncontrolled bouts of retaliation. Once such a situation occurred, most people in the settlement could be regarded to belong to one or the other party. Consequently, people had to disperse to avoid the risk of retaliation. When an American anthropologist, Jack Stauder, conducted intensive research in the area located near the E area, he described it as being uninhabited (Stauder 1971: 183). However, as can be seen by interpreting aerial photos taken in 1967 (shortly after his research period) that secondary growth, which could be estimated to have occurred up 10 to 20 years after abandonment, had extended widely.

As the background of blood revenge that had happened repeatedly, there was a state of anarchy in which there was no governing institution (Stauder 1972). That is why the violence and settlement abandonment decreased after the 1980s, when "villagization" proceeded and governance by the DERG (Socialist government) began to penetrate the area. After "villagization", murderers were jailed.

However, settlement abandonments for these reasons were discontinued, entirely even after "villagization". The area B of Figure 5 is a case where large-scale village abandonment happened after "villagization". In a village of the B area, a murder was committed during a drinking bout in 1984. A male speared another over of a trivial dispute. The man impaled retaliated by also spearing the other, and he died on the spot. The other man was also killed the next day. It is unknown whether that dispute arose by chance or if there was a complicated feud between the two men. Nevertheless, the villagers abandoned the sedentary village immediately fearing retaliation, and dispersed to other villages. People did not resettle the area at least until the 2000s, and at present it is an uninhabited secondary forest with many *Ficus* sp. and other trees characteristic of secondary growth.

2) Execration and Spirits

Many settlements were abandoned because of execration. This type of abandonment also was related to the deaths of members of the settlement. So it resembles abandonment for other reasons.

The cause of serial deaths in a settlement was often attributed to spirits of the dead or a curse on someone in the settlement, even if the real cause was an infectious disease or something else. Once the cause of serial deaths was attributed to a curse or spirit of the dead, however, the settlement would be abandoned quickly.

As will be described below, the younger generation of the Majangir, who experienced “villagization” and accepted Christianity, abandoned the traditional belief that *tapa* had allegedly controlled. But these beliefs have not disappeared entirely from the people’s minds. Therefore, even recently curses can be a cause for people to abandon their villages. A village abandonment that happened in the 1990s was such a case.

In 1993, there was a project to construct a sedentary village in the D area of Figure 5. The area was sparsely populated and the people had scattered to small settlements before the start of the project. When the author visited the village in October, 1993, it was still under construction and people were moving to the center of the village. A church had already been constructed in the center of the village.

However, when the author revisited this area two years later, the situation had changed entirely. The village had been abandoned several months before his revisit, and the center of the village had become an uninhabited ruin. According to the people who had abandoned it and had moved to neighboring settlements, the cause of abandonment was the alleged curse of a female village member. Before the abandonment four people died within a month from a disease, and during this period people had seen something resembling a fireball floating around the village at night.

3) Acephalous Society and “Forest Tactics”

At least until the 1960s, Majangir society was a kind of acephalous society that lacked any institution or a political leader for governance. Moreover, on the savanna and in the highland beyond their forest, lurked many threats of raids. Under such conditions, as a sort of political anarchism, one of the most effective tactics that the forest dwellers could adopt was “the forest tactics,” which prefers a dispersed settlement over one that is concentrated, so that people could escape during an attack, and retaliate *pro re natal*.

During an emergency, they could escape quickly to forest, taking only portable equipment and other necessities, such as machetes, knives, fowls and a available food. Males often make hunting and gathering trips of several days or a few weeks duration to the forest and savanna, taking only a machete and firesticks. This style of emergency escape to the forest replicates ordinary subsistence

activities.

Such forest tactics are not just emergency behavior, but are related closely to the demographic structure of the Majangir, whose fertility was clearly low before “villagization”. This means that not only their population density was low owing to a dispersed lifestyle in the forest, but that the total fertility rate of Majang females was lower than even that of hunter-gatherers, who are known for their low fertility. Mean completed fertility of 98 Majang females born before the 1960s, which the author has recorded through long interviews since 2002, showed 3.6 live births per female (Figure 8). This value is much lower than the 4.6 of the !Kung, who are regarded as typical low fertility hunter-gatherers (Howell 1979).

Several reasons for the Majangir’s low fertility can be presumed. For example, the rate of unmarried people was high before “villagization”, because of a high divorce rate. Several norms regarding marital intercourse and reproduction related to their mobile lifestyle, however, could also influence their low fertility. They believe that a birth interval of three to four years is desirable, and that a shorter interval would “putrefy” (*majeng*) the senior child. This means in part that earlier weaning because of conception would lead to malnutrition of the oldest child, on the one hand. On the other, another implication concerns their mobility. They regard it as a problem if a couple has two children, who cannot walk unassisted in the forest. They express the problem of young children with proximate ages as “How can we move to escape with two infants when the Anywaa attack us?”

Therefore, the “forest tactics” that have been adopted by the forest-dwelling Majangir to cope with both the internal and external insecurities of their society permeate various aspects of their lifestyle and social structure, in addition to their settlement pattern. The forest itself is an indispensable space for living,; it protects them from their enemies, and provides them with all necessary resources.

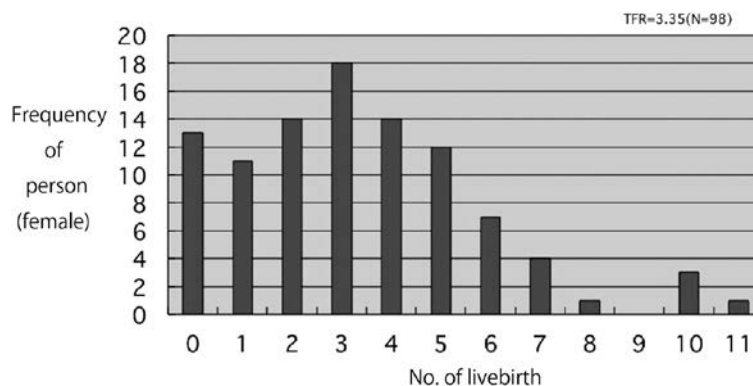


Figure 8 Frequency distribution of completed fertility among Majang females.
Source: Surveyed by the author

FROM NOMADIC TO SEDENTARY LIFE

1) Socialist Revolution and Acceptance of “Villagization”

The relationship between the Majangir and the Ethiopian government during the reign of the Ethiopian Empire was limited mainly to infrequent attempts at tax collection by local officers and which did not seem to be efficient (Stauder 1971). As slave trading and raids by other groups declined after World War II, however, towns with periodical markets that supplied various goods became attractive places to the Majang people. Commodities including goods for bride wealth, such as iron tools, increasingly attracted the Majangir, who came to inhabit areas near towns. As a consequence a large settlement emerged with hundreds of inhabitants, and where a powerful *tapa'd* lived (Stauder 1971).

The environment around the Majangir changed further after the Ethiopian socialist government (DERG) came to power, in 1974. The new government tried to control the peoples living in the lowland, who had been outside the governance of the Ethiopian Empire. The “villagization” policy was one such projects conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, in which the government tried to organize the peoples living dispersed in the savanna and the forests under State control, by making collective villages. This process started among the Majangir in 1979, following several years of preliminary projects.

Whereas in many other areas of Southern Ethiopia “villagization” failed because of resistance from the people, the Majang accepted the policy, and as a result many sedentary villages were constructed, with the present Godare and Mengesi administrative districts (*woredas*) as a center. Villages were large and densely populated by several hundreds of people. Further, they were sedentary, so that abandonment hardly ever occurred (Figures 9, 10). although the agents who implemented the policy were administrative officers, in Meti town they were young leaders of the Majangir born after the 1950s. They urged people to settle in the sedentary villages.

Many young leaders who promoted the new villages had experienced contact with an evangelical missionaries before “villagization” started. A Presbyterian mission began working among the Majangir in 1965 and conducted several kinds of activities for 11 years, until they were forced to leave Ethiopia by the DERG.. During their activities young Majang people in their teens or twenties attended school and church in the missionary center constructed in the Godare area, and were converted to Christianity. One reason why the Majangir were attracted to the mission was to take advantage of its medical services. According to the American missionary, even *tapa* that at first resisted the mission were finally vaccinated against smallpox in the missionary clinic (Hoekstra 1995). Consequently, young leaders of the Majangir, who had made contact with foreigners through the mission, accepted the government policy that proposed various kinds of administrative services, including medical care and schools as a replacement for the mission.

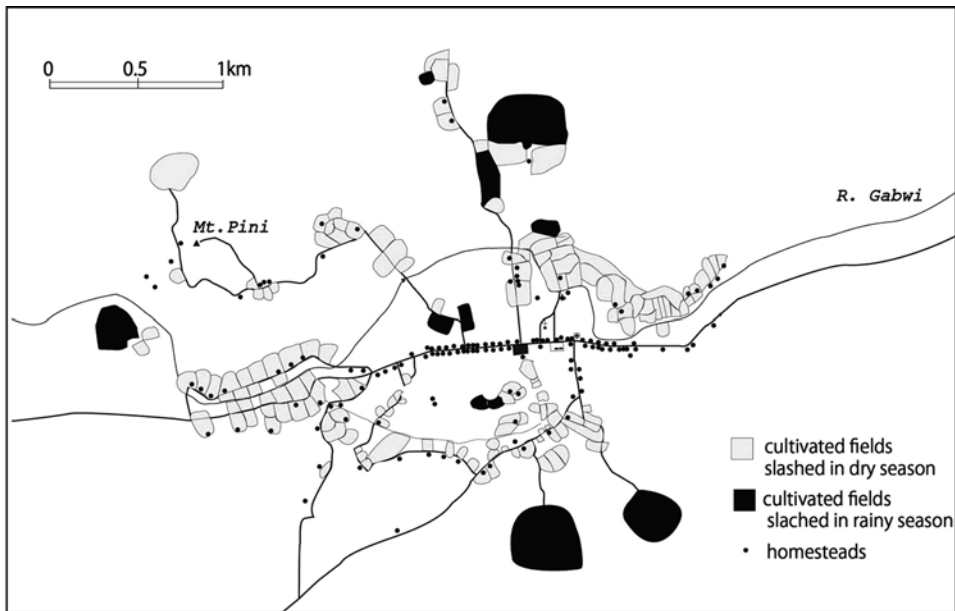
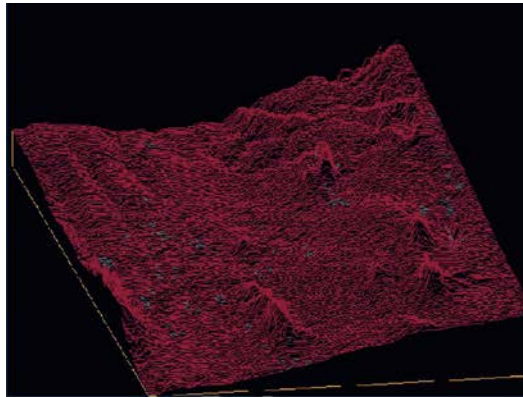


Figure 9 Map of a sedentary village (Kumi) in 1997.
Source: Surveyed and mapped by the author

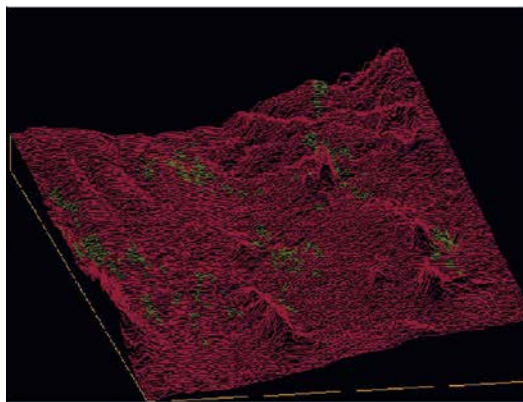
One of the then Majang leaders explained the difference between spirits in *saloy* (*saloy* means the shrines that *tapa* manage) and the Christian God as follows (Sato 2002: 190):

“I know *saloy*. For example, they dig a hole there while a house of a *tapa*’d is over there. According to him, he puts stones and *eemuy* (a plant name which is used as a symbol of *saloy*), so that *wakoyo* (“the God” in Majang language) lives there, and he also puts sorghum beer, meat of wild animals, or fowl’s blood. All this is because people found a wrong thing. Probably in the old days Satan would drink the blood. At the sorghum beer parties, also, people at first would go to a *saloy* place and pour some of it out there. Then people would drink. They lived such a life.

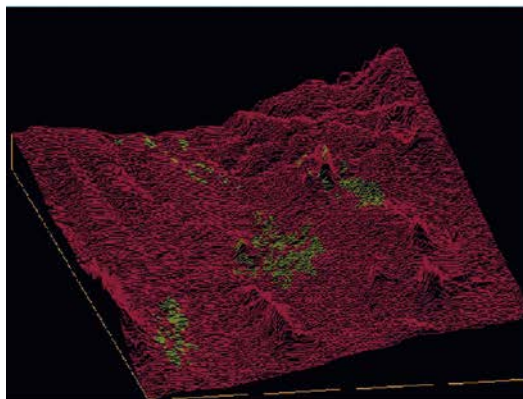
Gods of *saloy* (*wakoyo saloyongk*) and God of church (*wakoyo so gode sambateongk*) are entirely different. Gods of *saloy* are small. Why is this? Gods of *saloy* help everyday, usual things. For example, they are good for such things like making good tea, but they never help with big problems. They help only with tiny things. They are troublesome and always want sorghum beer and possess people. They live with some people and tempt them, and bring them to some places and have them drink. They say you will die if you don’t drink. and you really die, without beer.



1967



1984



1999

Figure 10 Transition of settlements and shifting field clearance as seen by GIS.
Source: Made by the author based on aerial photographs taken by US Air Force in 1967, topographic maps surveyed and mapped by Ethiopian government, and SPOT satellite image in 1999

The author also listened to and recorded a sermon that a young leader made in the new sedentary village that was under construction in 1993. In the sermon, he spoke about the “universality of Jesus Christ” and the new future life in the sedentary villages as follows:

Our fathers believed and worshiped different things. Our fathers thus lived disconnectedly from each other. Now we are different from what we were. *donjiyer* (Shekacho: a neighboring Omotic group, see the next chapter) worship Jesus Christ. *Gaaler* (Highlanders) worship Jesus Christ. Foreigners worship Jesus Christ. Majangir also worship Jesus Christ. *Meeriyer* (Bencho: a neighboring Omotic group) worship Jesus Christ. Those who remain are only us. *B'eriyer* (the Anywaa) worship Jesus Christ. Why do you remain alone? Today those who worship Jesus are good. Others who don't accept him and remain in small places will not be able to go towards the good way. Those who construct in the same place will thus say: ‘We worship the same God, and there is no difference between highlanders and the Majangir.’ All of us go the same way.

Now we have contacts with the government. We sometimes find mistakes in what they say. You work here in the new village. What do you want? What do you do? You will plant lots of cassava. What do you do? You will plant lots of sugar cane. What do you do? You will make large fields of sweet potato. And what do you do? You will make a church. You will do it here. What do you do? You will worship God. Here it is. And what will you see in the future? You will see lots of relatives here. ... What causes that? We owe it to the church. Have we ever benefited so much in the past? Have we ever learned in school up to now? Now we can open the door towards the outside. ... We plant sugar cane, cassava, sweet potato, and American taro (*Xanthosoma sagittifolium*), all over, up to that river. Villagers in distant places also work like this. We make a village like this and make lots of food. And there will be a church over there. And we will find guests here. We will invite school teachers. ... Elders and youngsters don't follow the old customs. ... How did our fathers get along? They drank and danced, and killed others. We, however, shall construct a new village, and enjoy life there. But we shall never drink.

The Majangir leaders believed the new villages and Christianity to be indivisible and they constructed churches in the village centers, where they gathered and exercised, and heard preaching by young leaders. In their sermons, leaders denied the old lifestyle by which they had lived in dispersed settlements, they drank local beers in rituals led by *tapa*, and opposed “the old Majangir,” recommending instead “the new Majangir” that lived in sedentary villages, wore Western clothes, and believed in Christianity (Photo 9).

2) Changing Environment and Tactics

Why did they accept the new lifestyle and change their settlement pattern so

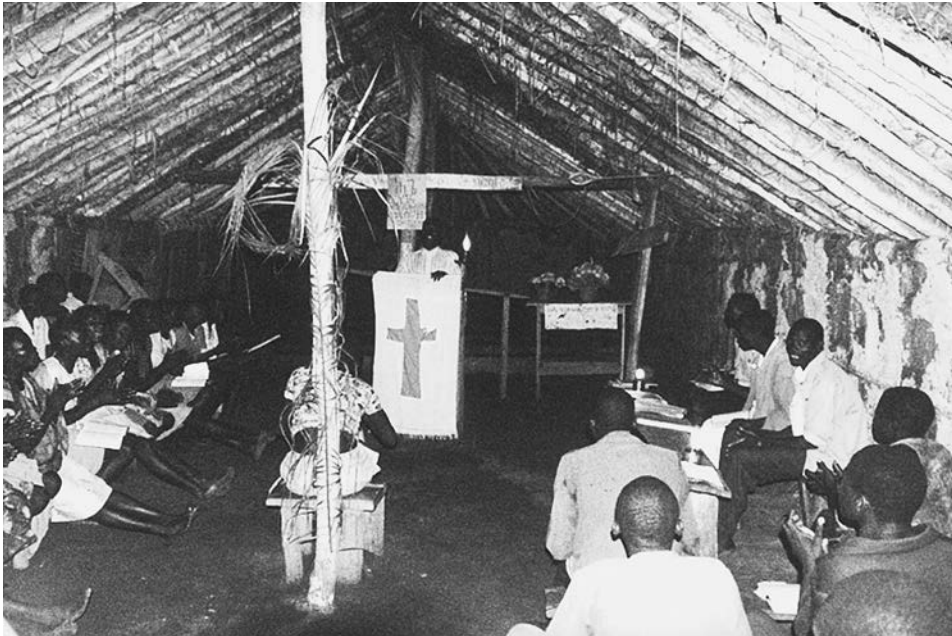


Photo 9 Preaching in a church of a sedentary village. (Photograph by the author, 1993)

quickly? Are these two alternative lifestyles arbitrary and exchangeable at any time? The factors that restrict the mobile settlement pattern and the inevitability of accepting sedentary life can be understood by discussing the changed conditions before and after “villagization”.

It has been seen already that the factors that compelled people to abandon settlements and move to different ones were issues in the domain of their social structure and their beliefs, such as social conflicts and fear of curses and spirits. Their fear of curses and spirits was based on their traditional spiritual belief controlled by *tapa*. In a broader sense, it also stems from social anxiety related to deaths.

The main reasons for social anxiety among them, such as slave trading and raids from neighboring peoples, declined after World War II, and gradually the world outside the forest became a peaceful place with which they could make contact. Additionally, the experience of the foreign mission and its medical activities introduced them to a way to cope with health problems, which had been the most important issue in their traditional life.

The “villagization” policy of the socialist government emerged under such conditions. The then administrators supplied the Majangir with Western clothes and large number of machetes to promote the construction of villages and agricultural production. Though the government expelled foreign missions, as one of its socialist policies, the young people of the Majangir that had experienced a

connection with the mission installed evangelical Christianity in their sedentary villages, and regarded the Christian belief as inseparable from the movement of “villagization”. Christianity was actually more congruent with the sedentary mode of life than was their traditional spiritual belief. In the traditional belief, the deaths of important members forced people to move, whatever the causes of those deaths. The young Majangir who promoted conversion to Christianity denied such spiritual beliefs, and consequently the dead were buried equally in the village cemetery.

Young leaders who contributed to the change of traditional lifestyles, beliefs and the worldview among the Majangir thus quickly seemed to lead people to a materially richer life, taking advantage of the state policy and tiding over the difficult situation of changing conditions from anarchic to relatively peaceful. Their desires were survival and a better life, and mobile and sedentary lifestyles were the tactics with which they accomplished their desires in each condition.

CHANGING CONDITIONS AND PERSISTENT ATTACHMENT TO FOREST LIFE

When the socialist government collapsed, in 1991, and the new provisional government (EPRDF) took power, which maintained ethnic autonomy as a federal policy, the Majangir were given a political delegacy in the autonomous Gambela Region. In this region, they were given a delegacy in the Federal Assembly and several administrative posts in the regional government as the third ethnic group, along with the Anywaa and the Nuer.

It is doubtful, however, that such an expansion of political rights was entirely desirable for them. As the central governance ceded a part of the rights, their autonomous rights were turned over to the local government, resulting in the emergence of new inter-ethnic conflicts concerning various kinds of interests. Thus the Majangir, who had been liberated from slave trade and raids under the umbrella of state control, became threatened by another form of conflict.

1) Attacks from East and West

Although the Majangir were acknowledged as a delegate in Gambela by the regional resolution of the EPRDF, the Majangir settlements are distributed in the broad area of the Oromia Region and the Southern Region (SNNPR) that border the Gambela Region. The Majang people who live in these two regions have limited terms of political engagement, and as a result it is difficult for them to receive satisfactory services from the local governments. Such situations have made them discontented with the unequal boundary.

Above all, there are many Majang villages around Tepi and Birhan, in the Southern Region. Historically, Tepi is a town created by forest clearance, and the Majangir had lived there until the Amhara traders came in the 1950s. Old Amharic pioneers have approved these historical facts. Tepi and the surrounding areas,

however, were distributed by the central government to the Omotic Shekacho, who had lived in the highland further to the north.

A group of Majang people, who felt strong discontent over the situation, attempted an armed uprising from April through May, 1993. They closed temporarily the road around Tepi and killed more than 100 people who were regarded as adherents of the Shekacho. This battle by the Majangir severely shocked not only the Shekacho but also many other people living in the town, because the Majangir, who were regarded as calm and peaceful people living silently in the forest, suddenly conducted a cruel and large-scale attack. In the forest near Birhan, moreover, the Majangir ambushed the EPRDF army with more than a hundred soldiers and beat them back, taking up position in their own forest.

Consequently, however, more than 300 Majang people, who had allegedly been involved in the armed attack, were arrested and imprisoned in Masha Town, the hometown of the Shekacho. The government of Tepi (Yeki *wereda*) was almost taken by the Shekacho. The then President of Godare *wereda*, who was one of the most important leaders among the Majangir, was also imprisoned and died from tuberculosis in 1995, immediately after he was released from prison.

This political problem remained unsolved, and a slaughter of the Majangir and the neighboring agriculturists, the Sheko, was incited by the Shekacho and their backers in February, 2002. In those days, the Majangir of the Southern Region were politically in alliance with the Sheko, who had been their neighbors and inhabited an area that overlapped with theirs. They formed a counterbalance against the Shekacho, who had continued their encroachment on the southern areas. The Shekacho attacked villages to inflict damage. Because the Shekacho were almost fully allied with administrators of the Southern Region, the police force dispatched from the regional capital (Awasa) sided with the Shekacho who burned down several villages of the Majangir and the Sheko near Tepi. The death toll amounted to several hundred among the Sheko and approximately 38 among the Majangir. It will be discussed in the next section why the number of casualties differed so much between the Majangir and the Sheko.

During those days at the western border, another conflict arose between the Majangir and the Anywaa. A homicide case, in which a Majang female was raped and killed and had her arms and legs cut off by several Anywaa males in July 2001, triggered mutual retaliations that continued for over a year. Before the conflict, the Majangir had been disarmed in 1998 by the federal government, whereas the Anywaa had been able to conceal some guns. This military imbalance worked strongly against the Majangir in the conflict. Although their relationship with the Anywaa, who used to raid the Majangir frequently, had been cooperative since the EPRDF took power and began to attempt regional autonomy, the conflict revived their mutually hostility, and the Majang people, that had lived together with the Anywaa in villages and had marital relations immediately escaped to the forest when the initial murder was committed. Thus the Majangir were struck between two kinds of enemies in the east and the west.

2) Persistent Forest Tactics

When the Majangir's attack against the Shekacho occurred in 1993 and the EPRDF pushed ahead to a Majang village near Tepi, the author was traveling with a Majang male guide to visit small settlements deeper in the forest. Trails in the forest were too obscure to be followed by anyone except the Majang. While returning to the village where he lived in those days, the author met a dozen Majang females coming from the opposite direction, carrying infants and backpacks with chickens, taro and knives (Photo 10).

The guide and the author had not known of the attack by the EPRDF force against a Majang village in the morning of that day until they heard the news from those females. They had escaped from the village immediately after the soldiers' arrival in combat vehicles to trace forest trails, and had picked up only emergency equipment. "*Yaadikak* (the EPRDF) came to retaliate against us, we might have been killed if we had delayed escaping!" they said. They were headed for traditional settlements where their relatives and friends lived, away from the sedentary villages.

They learned that the EPRDF had not come to attack them after all, and most people that had escaped to the forest returned to the sedentary village within a few days. Examining all the details, however, the author realized that the Majangir continued to use their tactics and abilities to utilize the forest environment for



Photo 10 Majang females escaping from a sudden EPRDF incursion into a Majang village in 1993. (Photograph by the author)

survival despite that their seemingly changed their lifestyles through sedentarization (Photo 11). Such behavior becomes evident during emergencies, like wars and conflicts.

During the 2002 slaughter by the Shekacho, the number of victims among the Majangir was much less than that among the Sheko, even though they were attacked at the same time. When the Sheko villages were assaulted and burned down, many people were driven into their houses and immolated inside them. In contrast, the Majangir rushed to the forest when their villages around Tepi were attacked. As they said, “The Sheko made the worst choice because they didn’t know how to do battle.” This might be the difference between the Sheko, who have lived as sedentary agriculturalists for many years, and the Majangir, who had lived in the forest until then.

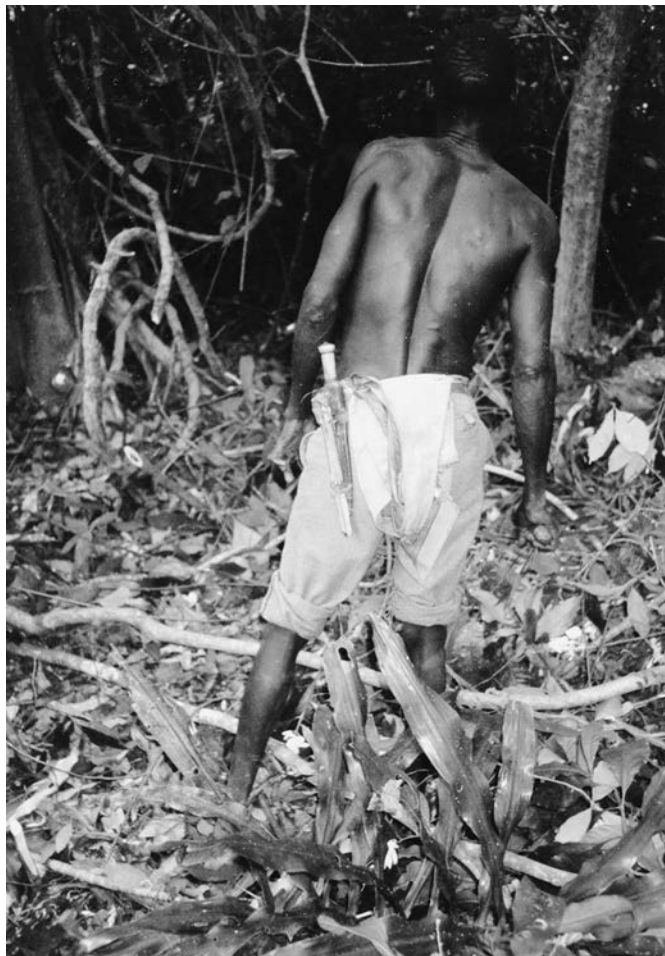


Photo 11 Majang in forest with machete, knife, and fire-sticks.
(Photograph by the author, 1993)

Although “villagization” greatly changed their mode of life, their “forest tactics” had been sustained and continued to provide indispensable knowledge for them to survive even nowadays. And these tactics are not only exerted during emergencies. They have been inherited through their everyday lives since childhood and juvenile years, as will be described next.

HOW FOREST TACTICS ARE ACQUIRED

It has been demonstrated that the Majang people have retained their “forest tactics,” despite having changed their settlement pattern, and that these tactics emerged clearly during times of crisis. And their subsistence, such as shifting cultivation and honey collecting, has always depended entirely on forest resources.

Such forest resource extractions are, of course, based on their deep knowledge about the forest (Sato 2014). Majang males, for example, do not lose their way even in deep forests without trails. They possess an eminent sense of direction that outsiders can hardly acquire. When the Majangir walk in the forest, they observe carefully the features of individual trees and micro-topography, and use them as landmarks to know their directions. Thus, they hardly mistake the direction even if they take different routes. When a Majang estimates the direction of destination, he often points to his occiput and says, “I can get the direction by asking here.”

The author supposes that their highly refined knowledge about the forest is not innate. Majang people who were brought up in towns during their childhood are often unable to use machetes properly and cannot climb trees for honey collecting when they settle in forest villages as adults. When seeing such people, who vomit because they are unable to bear the smell of herbs and who are afraid to climb a tree, the Majangir worry saying, “How can they survive in the future?” Actually, in their way of life, males who cannot clear forests and females who cannot harvest crops in fields in bare feet face difficulty in surviving.

They point out that it is important for children to begin learning forest life at six or seven years old, and to learn little-by-little up to their mid-teens. If children pass these ages without learning, they say, it is difficult to acquire knowledge and skills after reaching adulthood. The knowledge and skills necessary for males are primarily forest clearing for shifting cultivation and honey collecting; for females they are firewood collecting, water-carrying, cereal flour making, cooking, and harvesting from shifting fields (Photos 12–16). Making earthenware is also an important skill for females, however, not only effort but also talent are required for this skill, so some females cannot make satisfactory products even if they have practiced since childhood (Photos 17, 18). For these reasons, children begin learning skills by playing in the forest and acquire them step-by-step during childhood and adolescence.

Figure 11 shows age-specific numbers of the beehives owned by individual males. People say that at least 30 beehives are necessary for a male to earn



Photo 12 Children carrying firewood to their home. (Photograph by the author, 1997)



Photo 13 Ten year old girl splitting firewood. (Photograph by the author, 2004)



Photo 14 Six year old girl beginning to make cereal flour.
(Photograph by the author, 2011)



Photo 15 Six year old boy playing a honey collecting game. (Photograph by the author, 2004)



Photo 16 Girls making bark-cloth from a tangi (*Antiaris toxicaria*) tree stem.
(Photograph by the author, 1993)



Photo 17 Earthenware pot making by a Majang female. (Photograph by the author, 2009)



Photo 18 Majang female with earthenware that she made. (Photograph by the author, 2009)

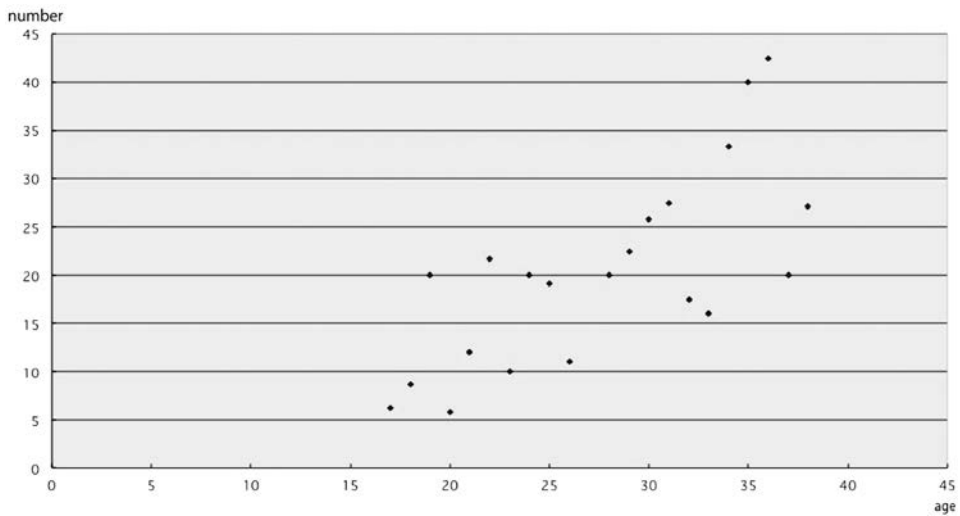


Figure 11 Age-specific numbers of beehives owned by individual males.
Source: Surveyed by the author

enough money to support a wife and children. Actually, as Figure 11 shows, the average number of beehives possessed by individuals is less than 20 in their twenties, and it is common for young males to marry even if they don't have

more than 20 beehives. In any case, highly sophisticated skills such as making beehives, estimating where to put them, and tree-climbing skills in the darkness, are required for honey collecting.

Male children at six or seven years of age often play at honey collecting, putting toy-beehives in tree branches. Children of approximately 10 years of age begin helping their fathers with honey collecting, accompanying them to the forest (Photo 19). Although they cannot climb high trees for collecting honey like their fathers until they reach their late-teens, they will finally acquire the ability to earn the same amounts of money when they approach 30 years-of-age. Thus, honey collecting is a highly skilled activity, and much time is required for the acquisition of the skill. As for shifting cultivation, children begin clearing fields with their fathers during their early-teens and they are able to clear their own fields by the time they reach their twenties (Photo 20).

Female children begin helping with domestic work, such as water-carrying, firewood collecting, and cooking, at around eight years of age. Whereas male children seemingly hardly contribute to their household economy at around 10 years of age, female children are often important contributors. In regard to cooking, however, it is not until their late-teens that they can cook satisfactory meals to be served for their fathers and guests. High skill is required for cooking white porridges (*kiiv*) made of maize, because it can become spotty and badly-



Photo 19 Children on a honey collecting expedition with their father. (Photograph by the author, 1993)



Photo 20 Boys preparing for slashing a shifting field. (Photograph by the author, 2004)

colored if unskilled children cook it. Hence, females also practice for years, throughout their teens, as their mothers' helpers.

Thus the period between their sixth year and early twenties is indispensable for learning to acquire skills for survival in the forest, equivalent to school ages in modern societies. "Forest tactics" are acquired over a long time and inherited among the generations.

CONCLUSION

The circumstances surrounding the Majangir have continued to change throughout the 20th century up to the present, and they have coped with these changing circumstances, made choices from among their given conditions, and formed their own lifestyles. In this article, the people's behavior has been described as a sustainable strategy that responds flexibly to changing environments, and devises the best way of life at each time. This article has focused especially on inter-ethnic relations and political stability (or instability) as changing environmental conditions, and has discussed the process through which the Majangir changed their lifestyles from dispersed to sedentary.

Critical circumstances have always existed around them. Even after slave trading and raids declined, new forms of conflict among ethnic groups emerged,

and these threats overshadowed their everyday lives. To cope with such difficulties, the Majangir created niches that differed from their neighboring groups, and have survived up to the present. They changed some tactics flexibly according to their changing environment, whereas others persisted even when the environment changed. Persistent tactics may be rooted deeply in Majangir culture. Although the forest is the environment from which they extract all the resources they need, it is also the natural bastion where they defend their lives against enemies' attacks. For the Majangir, the forest is the basis that sustains their lives in various ways. That they identify themselves as "forest people" may reflect this reality.

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