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THE MAJANGIR:
ECOLOGY AND SOCIETY OF A SOUTHWEST ETHIOPIAN PEOPLE
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THE MAJANGIR
ECOLOGY AND SOCIETY OF A SOUTHWEST ETHIOPIAN PEOPLE

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And to Bangwili who died in childbirth
PREFACE

This book is based on fieldwork which my wife and I conducted from November 1964 to September 1966 among the Majangir of southwest Ethiopia.

In Majangirland there are no roads, but narrow and difficult trails through thick forest, passable only by foot. Even animal transport is made impossible by the presence of tse-tse fly. From the town of Gambela, outside of Majangirland and served by air from Addis Ababa, my wife and I journeyed in November 1964 to the Majang settlement I call Til-Emyekai, on the Shiri River, two-and-a-half days’ walk from Gambela (see Map 1, chapter 1). Til-Emyekai became our home and base for fieldwork during the following year.

Very little had previously been known about the Majang language; in fact my wife and I are presumably the first Westerners to have learned to speak it. As no Majangir speak English, we at first communicated with them through the Galla language which a few of them speak. As our own knowledge of Galla was as rudimentary as that possessed by most Majangir, we quickly abandoned it as we learned Majang. We acquired the language of the Majangir necessarily through close attention and use, without formal aids or instruction but with the advantage of having no one to speak to but Majangir, and no real alternative to speaking their language. Therefore virtually all our data were obtained directly, and through the native language, without any use of interpreters or intermediary languages.

In the spring and summer of 1965 we journeyed by foot to other areas of Majangirland, including the ‘Sale’ area north of the Bongga River (see Maps 1 and 3), and the areas south to the Mi’i, Godare and Fach’a Rivers. In September 1965 we moved our home and camp to the Majang settlement of ‘Gilishi-Gabwi’ at the confluence of the Fach’a and Bakko Rivers, a day’s walk from the Ethiopian town of Teppi (see Maps 1 and 4), which is served by air from Addis Ababa. From Gilishi I later visited Majang settlements in the Alanga or ‘Dawar’ River area. The only regions of Majangirland I did not visit were those south of Gurrafarda, east of Teppi and north of the Baro (see Map 1).

In September 1966 we left Majangirland to return to Cambridge University, after having spent almost 24 months in Ethiopia, about 20 of these months in the field.

My field research, and a subsequent nine months in writing the dissertation on which the present work is based, were supported by a generous
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Fellowship grant from the Foreign Area Fellowship Program. Following this support, I received a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation. I wish to acknowledge the financial assistance of these two bodies which made this work possible.

In Addis Ababa I was given practical advice, supervision and hospitality by Dr William Shack and Dorothy Shack, by Professor Jean Comhaire, and by Mr Georges Savard, to all of whom I owe much thanks. I wish to acknowledge also the essential help I received through the offices of Dr Richard Pankhurst and the Institute for Ethiopian Studies, particularly in gaining governmental permission for my research.

In the provinces we were given assistance and hospitality by many persons. Our greatest debt is to Alex Kydoniatis, and later his wife, for the help and kindness they showed to us in Gambela. In Teppi we received similar help and hospitality from Mr Kochera and from our close friend Tsege Kebede. We are grateful also for the friendly attention shown us in Meti by Ato Getachew.

In both Gambela and Teppi we benefited from the friendly and efficient services of the Ethiopian Airlines and of the Imperial Posts. We want to thank their several employees who personally helped us in so many ways, and extended as well their hospitality on many occasions. Especially we are grateful to Zerihoun Alemayhou of Ethiopian Airlines for the interest he showed in our work.

There had been no Christian missionary activity in Majangirland at the time of our arrival there, but in early 1965 the American (Presbyterian) Mission began its project of building an airfield, church, school and dispensary on the Godare River. We were able to visit for a short time the site of this project, and while there we were the guests of Mr and Mrs Harvey Hoekstra of the Mission. They were very helpful and kind to us during our stay.

Among the people in whose lands we travelled and lived during our time in the field – the Galla, Anuak, and of course Majangir – we received sympathy and hospitality from so many persons that it would be impossible to cite all of them individually. As it would seem unlikely that any of them might ever read this, such acknowledgments are perhaps unnecessary. Nevertheless, I would like to recognize those whom we remember especially: our first friend and good informant, Pendangke; our good neighbours Lapita, Tondeshiro, Yemyengkai and Kwedejop; our protectors Pajau and Yodn; our helper Sheshakan; our friends Iwiak and Shoshokek; our comrades, the youths Ngingkani, Yanggan, Podengat and Jilkit; and the old man Lempeshe.

I would like to thank several persons who helped me in England. Pro-
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Professor Meyer Fortes gave me timely advice and encouragement, both before and after I went to the field. My fellow student Elizabeth Kennedy read and offered very valuable criticism of several chapters of this work. Dr Godfrey Lienhardt and Dr Paul Baxter, the readers of my Ph.D. dissertation, offered a number of useful criticisms. Dr Jack Goody supervised my research and the writing of my dissertation from beginning to end, and I owe him a great debt of gratitude for the innumerable ways in which he helped and encouraged me.

I revised my dissertation for publication while at Harvard University. I was encouraged in this project by Professor Evon Z. Vogt, who also helped me to obtain a small University grant to complete my work. I should thank Professor Vogt too as the teacher who originally interested me in the field of anthropology.

Finally, I should acknowledge the contribution of my wife Wunderley. Although not trained in anthropology, she provided constant and valuable assistance in my field research, and of course she was my co-worker in the various practical problems of everyday life in Ethiopia. Since our return, she has also helped me in various ways to prepare the data we collected.

June 1970
Cambridge, Massachusetts

J. S.