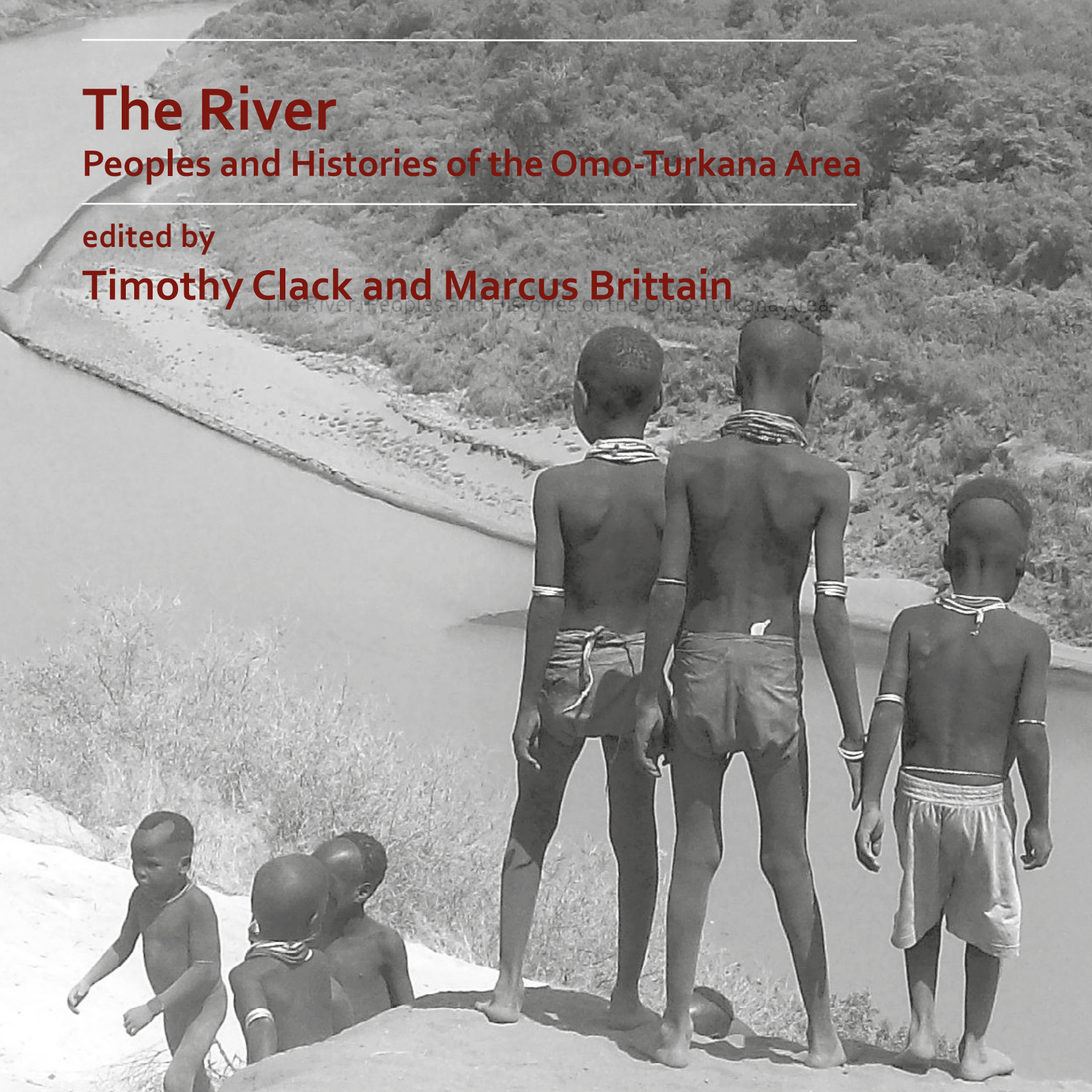
The River

Peoples and Histories of the Omo-Turkana Area

edited by

Timothy Clack and Marcus Brittain



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Cover image: View of the Omo River from Kara Korcho, March 2008 (credit: M. Bassi)

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Ethnic groups in the tri-nation boundary region

In a ritual act, after a long journey, a Mursi man throws clay into the Omo River (credit: T. Clack)

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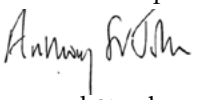
Foreword

Ethiopia's diversity informs a political landscape that includes all forms of governance from egalitarianism to bicameral democracy and attempts to marry federalism and tribalism. The country's unique status as the only African nation without a history of colonialism, excepting a short-lived and contested Italian presence in some areas, has maintained a rich cultural mosaic that spans across the historical narratives of ancient Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Rastafari traditions, as well as a wide range of proud indigenous peoples.

Mentioned in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as the works of Herodotus, Ethiopia's extensive treasure trove includes the iconic, 'Iron Lion of Zion' made famous by Bob Marley, the rock hewn churches of Lalibela, and the Beta Israel homeland of Gondar. Some even contend that the lost Ark of the Covenant and the fabled mines of King Solomon are also to be found here. Yet despite offering up these forms of global heritage, and for that matter some exquisite examples of virtually every stage of human evolution in Africa, including the world-famous hominin 'Lucy', Ethiopia has so far safeguarded many illuminations from the ages. What is more, the remarkable ethnic patchwork to be found in Ethiopia has long attracted archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists, historians and others to the four corners, but their work of understanding is far from complete.

This volume is the first to explore one of the richest – culturally, linguistically, ethnically – environments in Ethiopia: the land of the Lower Omo Valley. This collection of short pieces, encouraged by local people as a means of communicating with national and international audiences, is also a celebration of the Omo River. Transformation is the nature of the modern world. The local communities and the environments they inhabit have changed in the past and continue to do so. From the deep time of human evolution to the symbolic and material resonances of the present, this book offers glimpses of some of the most fascinating time periods, cultures and places in the world. As this collection attests, as well as offering lifestyles to local people in ways that in some cases have endured for centuries, if not millennia, the Lower Omo continues to furnish scholars with significant revelations, and these resonate far beyond Ethiopia helping us all gain insight into humanity and the unknown.

The Lower Omo is the landscape of the first humans, an environment of riverine forests and savannahs, and a dynamic crossroads of cultures and languages. It is resplendent with unique material cultures, histories, traditions and relationships. This exceptional landscape is under threat presently from a battery of external interventions. The concomitant endangerment of people, lifeways, heritage and knowledge must – where possible and by those able – be mitigated. There is a role here for everyone: from the tourist, collector and aid worker to the researcher, investor and bureaucrat. Understanding the social and intellectual importance of this landscape is an important first step.



Anthony, Lord St John of Bletso

Introduction

The Omo-Turkana area is today home to a unique diversity of peoples and cultures. Spanning a large part of Ethiopia's southwestern highlands and northern Kenya, it is a landscape of flat grassland, scrubs and desert plains, interrupted by high ranges and scarred by deep recesses, all of which are moulded by freshwater flows dominated by the great Omo River that meanders southwards, draining into Lake Turkana.

The river and the lake were amongst the last in Africa to become known to Europeans, yet during the course of the last century the area has been a source of considerable interest to palaeontologists, archaeologists and anthropologists, the record from which, whether this covers four million years or focuses upon the present day, is of considerable global value. Rarely is such range and depth of insight from a singular geographic region brought together, however. We have therefore aimed here to provide an introduction to the many faces and facets of the people and environments that give life to the Omo-Turkana area, both in the present and in the past. The volume's many contributors are amongst the leading specialists presently working across the region, and although focused on many different aspects of its character, we believe that they

A view from the bank of the Omo River in Mursi (credit: M. Sevilla-Callejo)

An archaeologist using surveying equipment (foreground) whilst a herder drives one of his cattle
(credit: A. Arzoz)

share a common thread of concern that centres upon the diversity of the human condition – its origins, development, versatility and vulnerability.

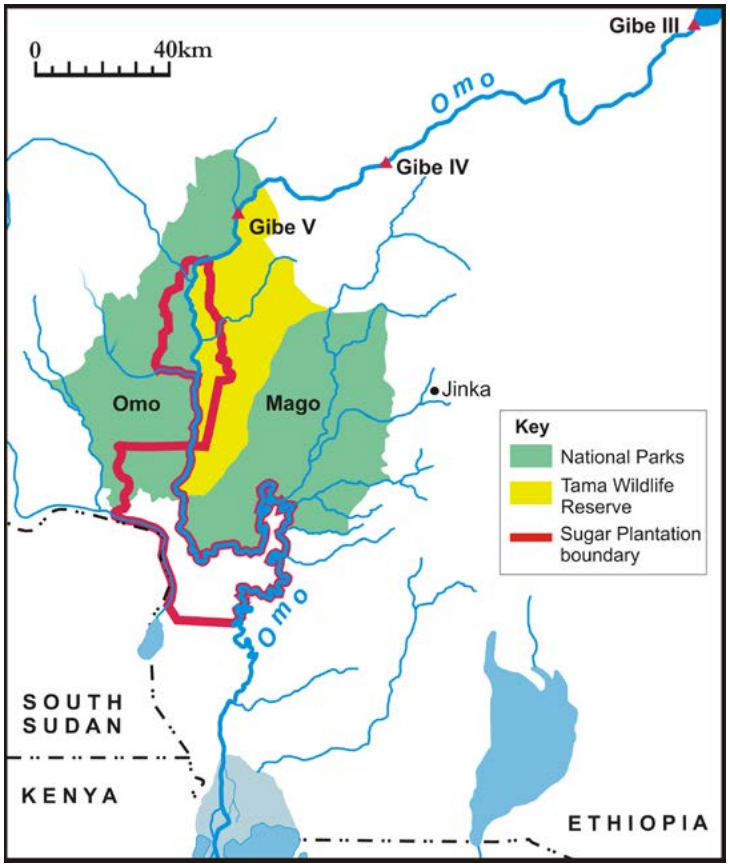
The volume is formed of five sections. Palaeontological and archaeological studies comprise Parts 1 and 2, which are dedicated to the earliest developments of life in the area, from 3.5 million years ago, to a comparatively recent era recounted – often by competing narratives – in traditional oral histories by its present communities. The region has long been famed for its fossil record, sealed in sequences of sedimentary and volcanic deposits that provide conditions for accurate dating. In the 1960s, the first truly international team of researchers turned to the Omo River Valley, and systematic work into the evolutionary and cultural history of humankind and relative species has since continued almost unabated. This remarkable record of fossilised hominin and human biology is now accompanied by an increasingly detailed understanding of the changing environments and ecologies through which technological and behavioural innovation – much being revealed by the study of stone tools – took place. Working to scales of many millennia, and with some of the oldest evidence for anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*), small discoveries may have significant implications for the ways in which the collective history of our species is interpreted.

The later prehistory of the Omo-Turkana area is a rich endorsement of the vibrant range of subsistence strategies adopted by successive human inhabitants, and particularly foregrounds a series of megalithic traditions which, at different times, are either unique to the region or share similarities with groups elsewhere in north and

The Omo River and its environs have been of considerable popular interest in the West, underpinned primarily by notions of distance and the exotic. From right to left and top to bottom: front cover from *Antiquity* journal, 2015; front cover from *National Geographic Traveller*, 2011; promotional leaflet for an exhibition at Imperial War Museum North, 2010; and advert for Ethiopia Airlines, 1976

east Africa. These evince diverse forms of occupation and subsistence, from at least the Middle Stone Age into the present day, punctuated by population movements and blends of languages and identities, particularly through the crossroads of the Lower Omo Valley. Its reputation as an important centre of cultural contact is reflected by its representation in publications and museum displays, and especially by its status since 1980 as one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites, championed in its listing for being 'unlike any other place on Earth' in that 'so many different types of people have inhabited such a small area of land over many millennia.' (The full text is available here: https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/17).

The mix of cultural groups across the area as reflected by today's inhabitants is explored in Parts 3 and 4. Multiple groups occupy the landscape. A multitude of languages, ways of life, of material culture and bodily decoration, identify distinctions in group membership across the territories, whose relations are visibly complex and often in a state of unstable interdependence. Across the majority of these groups, cattle form the basis of their cultural and economic currency, where the seasons, horticulture pattern, rhythms of mobility, ceremony and community, to name but a few elements, permeate social discourse and identities. Part 3 focuses upon one of these groups, the Mursi, so to provide a more rounded basis of comparison to other neighbouring



Map of the Lower Omo Valley showing the location of dams (at different phases of construction), boundaries of the irrigation-fed sugar plantation, and designated national parks and wildlife reserve

groups, as introduced in Part 4. Encounters with the Bodi, Chai, Dasanetch, Hamar, Kara, Kwegu, Mursi, Nyangatom, Suri and Turkana will, we hope, offer prefatory insight to the dynamics of difference and interdependence that frame life in this small and unique geographical pocket.

Since the late nineteenth century, the Omo-Turkana area has attracted considerable interest from onlookers outside and beyond, particularly over the course of at least the last thirty years. Such interventions are the concern of Part 5, which opens with a background to the early explorers, hunters and scientists that entered the Omo Valley, especially noting their intentions and observations. Published in journal accounts, books and news reports, these accounts provide a recent history of contact with the region's ethnic groups, if not a history of the character of the groups themselves. These accounts constructed a popular image and understanding of the region and its communities, the legacy of which, along with quite fantastical representations of the ethnic 'Other' in numerous photo journals, has seen unprecedented growth of 'ethno'-tourism. Similarly, 'eco'-tourism has been a feature of the Lower Omo Valley since the establishment in the 1970s and 1980s of two National Parks and a nature reserve, each purportedly conserving a natural wilderness 'unspoilt' by human intervention. These are amongst the many facets of global modernity and its impacts that 'local' groups such as the Mursi today face as a challenge to the long-term sustainability of their traditional ways of life. New communication technologies, as an example, may enable the region's groups to coordinate some means of autonomous solution, such as the formation of a Community Conservation Area, though other challenges lie ahead.

When fully operational the Gibe III dam will be third largest hydro-electric plant in Africa. Planned for completion in 2013, the project has been plagued by delay and controversary regarding its social and environmental impacts (credit: Creative Commons)

The rate of change in the Omo-Turkana area has undoubtedly accelerated in a short space of time. A considerable factor in this is an influx of development infrastructure. Large tracts of the Omo River have been given over to industrial plantations growing cotton and sugarcane, denying access to many of the inhabitant groups that are seasonally reliant upon cultivation of the nutritious soils along its banks. Greater still are Ethiopia's energy demands and its ambitions for hydro-power, of which only around 5% of its potential has been exploited. The construction of dams and power stations along the Omo River is an apparent solution, and Gibe III dam was inaugurated in 2016. The impact of its riverflow management combined with the plantation operations will be unprecedented; the outcome for communities across the region is uncertain, but the pace of change to the environment and a lack of clear-sighted mitigation strategies do not, sadly, present a promising outlook.

Construction work for an irrigation canal on the left back of the Omo River in Bodiland, November 2012

The volume's twenty-six authors offer first-hand glimpses into the area's cultures and environments, past and present. In face of new and compelling challenges, the need to engage with and gain an understanding of the wealth of heritage, culture and humanity in this unique location is imperative.

This volume is dedicated to the peoples – past, present and future – of the Lower Omo Valley and Lake Turkana Basin.

TC and MB, Oxford, October 2018

For online resources associated with the content of this volume please visit:

http://in-africa.org/
https://mursi-archaeology.com
http://mursi.org
http://www.turkanabasin.org/

Part 1: Prehistoric Life and Environment

A diverse array of bone harpoons from West Turkana, Kenya (credit: A. Wilshaw)

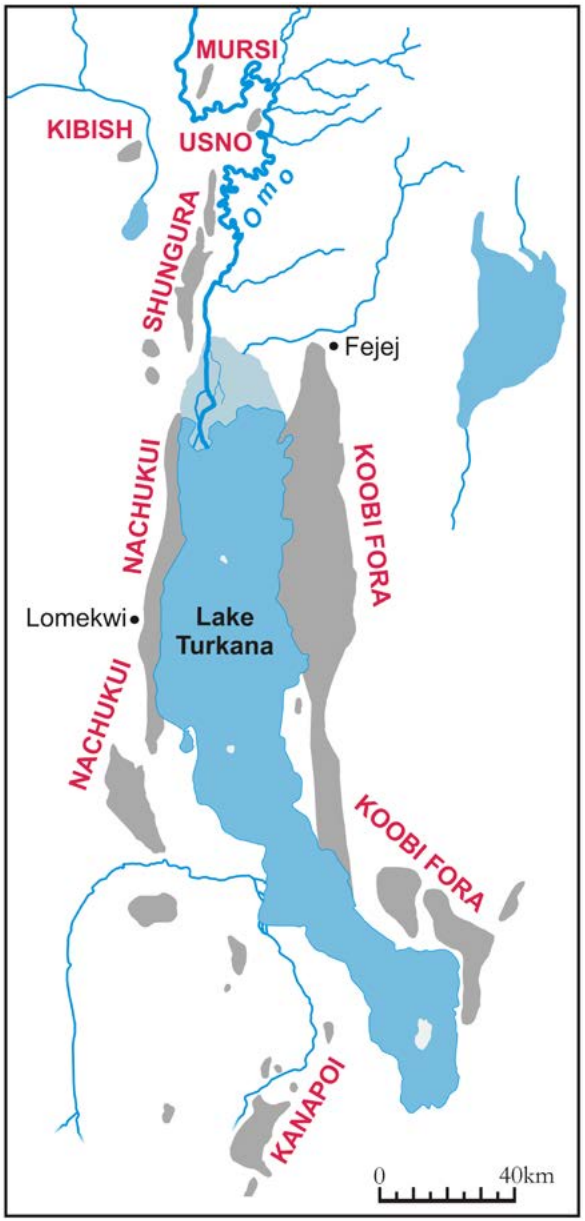
1. Hominins and First Humans in the Lower Omo Valley

Alex Wilshaw and Marta Mirazón Lahr

The Lower Omo Valley is renowned for some of the most important fossil and archaeological discoveries that elucidate the pattern and process of our evolution from its early beginnings more than 4 million years ago to the origins of our own species 200,000 years ago. Its attribution as a World Heritage Site is much deserved for the study of hominins: members of the human lineage after its separation from the chimpanzee lineage.

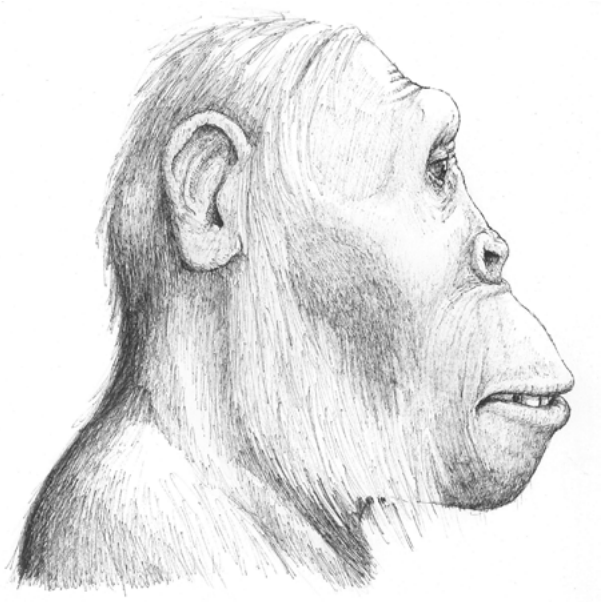
The area boasts an expanse of formations, eroded into a maze of hills and gullies by millennia of African winds and rains, to reveal the diverse colours of horizontal beds, once hidden from sight. These distinctive geological beds of brown, cream and white sediments are easily identifiable to those who know the area well, and importantly for those who study them, they can be tracked across the vast landscape. Each sedimentary formation has its own name and each is associated with a different part of our prehistory. Over the last 50 years, geologists, palaeontologists and archaeologists have studied the stratigraphic layering of the sediments in the Lower Omo Valley, and with the application of radiometric and palaeomagnetic dating methods, the temporal and spatial relationship between these banded strata is well documented. Within the geological complexity of the area, there are three sets of sediments of particular importance for those studying the evolution of hominins in East Africa: the Usno, the Shungura and the Kibish formations.

Fejej and the Lower Omo Valley (credit: Google Earth)



Geological formations of the Lower Omo Valley and Turkana Basin

The Usno formation is the most ancient of the three, yet remains the least well known. At around 4 million years old, it spans the Pliocene era which gives rise to one of the most diverse lineages within hominin evolution – a group of hominins known as the Australopithecines. These small bodied, small brained bipedal (walking on two feet) hominins subsisted on a diet of fruits and other vegetation, potentially supplemented with opportunistic meat eating. They are well-known from across both eastern and southern Africa between 3.5 and 2 million years ago, but extremely rare before this time. Teeth of some of the earliest australopithecines ever known, a species called *Australopithecus anamensis*, were discovered at the site of Fejej, in the Lower Omo Valley, dating to



Artist's impression of *Australopithecus anamensis* (credit: D. Warren)

The Usno Formation (credit: K. Monteil)

over 4 million years ago. These are some of the most crucial fossils from the area. Although many of the individuals from the Omo Valley are represented by only isolated finds, such as a single molar or a finger bone, they represent an exclusive glimpse at the number and diversity of our earliest ancestors.

As hominin evolution continues into the Plio-Pleistocene era, in the Lower Omo Valley the focus shifts to the Shungura formation. This formation covers a vast area, spanning more than 60 km and a long period of time,

Remains attributed to *Paranthropus boisei* (OMO323) (credit: A. Wilshaw)

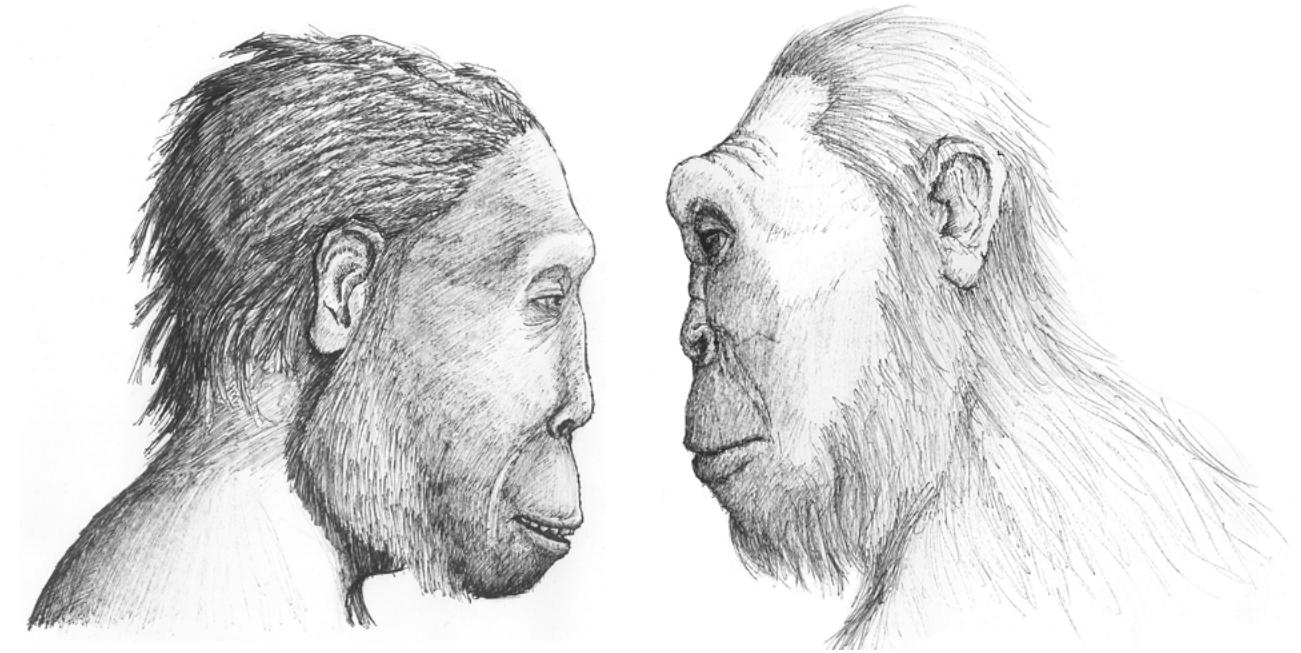
beginning around 3.5 million years ago and in some areas lasting until as late as 1 million years ago. The formation boasts 110 hominin fossil localities, and despite 60 years of investigation, the area is still producing novel discoveries. One such example is the discovery of the skeletal remains of *Paranthropus boisei* described in 2018. These remains are from the same locality, OMO323, where fragments of a *Paranthropus boisei* skull and teeth were discovered in 1973. This species is predominantly represented by fossils from the Lower Omo region and is the most robust of the megadontic (huge teeth) radiation of robust australopithecines in East Africa. Like all other hominins, they were bipedal, but the curvature in the bones of their hands suggests they may have also been good tree climbers.

The Shungura formation has also yielded archaeological evidence of the technologies used by our early ancestors (see chapter 3), evidence that can elucidate the behaviours of those early hominins whose biological remains now rest in the National Museum in Addis Ababa. Some of the most ancient stone tools known in prehistory were discovered in Levels E and F of the formation. This ancient technology, made locally from quartz pebbles, is part of what is known as the Oldowan industry, the array of stone tools made and used by

An artist's impression of *Paranathropus boisei* eating (credit: D. Warren)

The Shungura Formation (credit: K. Monteil)

early hominins. The Oldowan is known from Olduvai Gorge in northern Tanzania, and although originally attributed to this name, the tool assemblages found in the Lower Omo Valley were deemed distinct enough, and also so important for our understanding of how hominins behaved, that they were given their own name to differentiate the Ethiopian collections from those of Tanzania. Referred to as the 'Shungura facies' or Omo Stone Tool Industrial Complex, when these artefacts were discovered in the 1970s they pushed back



Artist's impression of *Homo habilis* (left) and *Paranthropus boisei* (right) (credit: D. Warren)

the known date for hominin technological development to over 2 million years (which at the time was unprecedented!), and although it is now superseded by older (3 million years) sites more recently discovered at the site of Lomekwi 3 in West Turkana, Kenya, these were the first archaeological remains to really challenge palaeoanthropologists to consider that hominin tool-making may have been part of the survival kit of multiple species of early hominin and not just our direct ancestors.

The site of Fejej, further to the east, transcends both the Usno and Shungura formations, and likewise preserves an abundance of hominin fossils from the period. Three molars discovered at the site of FJ1, a short-term occupation site with a living floor still intact (one of only five in eastern Africa), show great similarity to those attributed to fossils of *Homo habilis* discovered at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, and establish the extensive range of this species in the East African landscape. As in the Shungura Formation, the site of Fejej has also yielded fossils of the robust australopithecine *Paranthropus boisei,* suggesting that around 2 million years ago the rich environment could support different hominin species at the same time.

The Kibish Formation (credit: K. Monteil)

The Lower Omo Valley also preserves sediments that are much more recent than the above, dating to the last 200,000 years. This final formation is known as the Kibish formation, also referred to as Omo Kibish, and although the youngest of our trilogy it remains the most well-known amongst students and scholars alike. Its entry to the limelight came in the late 1960s, when a young palaeoanthropologist looking to make his name in the field, turned his attention to the region. In doing so, Richard Leakey not only made his own name as a world renowned palaeoanthropologist and conservationist, but he

Location of fossil finds Omo I and II (credit: J. Fleagle)

also etched the Kibish into history when he and his team discovered the fossil remains colloquially known as Omo I and II.

Part of a much larger collection that incorporates more than 200 fossil fragments, these two individuals are the earliest evidence of our own species, *Homo sapiens,* known anywhere in the world. Dated to approx. 195,000 years ago, they are direct evidence from the dawn of our time and remain the only specimens in the

world from this period. The fossils show how we developed morphologically into modern people, as well as underpinning our understanding of how, when and where we first became the population of humans that we are today. It is thus appropriate to recognise this area as the cradle of modern humanity.

Despite its small size, the Lower Omo Valley has produced more than its fair share of evidence for the elucidation of hominin evolution, and without its valuable contribution, our understanding of prehistory would be significantly diminished.

Further Reading

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2. Early Prehistory of Fauna and Environment in Mursiland

Michelle Drapeau

As part of the Great African Rift Valley, the early prehistory of the Lower Omo Valley has been subject to lengthy investigations by teams from all over the world. The most recent researchers to take the field continue to push the boundaries of both science and the human species. This contribution explores the history of palaeontology in the area and asks: can we make the silent fossils speak and what do they tell us?

Early Palaeontological Work

The Lower Omo Valley has been regarded as a palaeontological 'hot spot' for over a century. Indeed, the French expedition led by Viscount du Bourg de Bozas, whilst crossing Africa from the Red Sea to the Atlantic during 1902-3, reported numerous animal fossils in the area. This prompted the French palaeontologist, Camille Arambourg to conduct fieldwork on the right bank of the Omo River in the early 1930s, which, in turn, helped to underscore the importance of the area in understanding African fauna throughout the Pliocene and Pleistocene.

In 1967, the International Palaeontological Research Expedition to the Omo River was organised. This comprised a French team led by Arambourg and Yves Coppens, an American team led by Clark Howell, and a Kenyan team led by Richard Leakey. It was decided that the French and American teams would work on the known fossil beds of the right bank, while the Kenyan team would work on the left bank, in the Mursi territory. Reportedly, Leakey was unhappy to have been assigned the unknown and less fossiliferous left bank. Nonetheless, that year, his team found two human skulls and other fragments as well as some stone tools and other materials in the Kibish Formation. It was quickly established that the two skulls were anatomically modern, possibly among the earliest representatives of *Homo sapiens*. At the time they were thought to be older than 30-40,000 years and possibly even older than 100,000 years. That same year, the Kenyan team also found older deposits, which they named the Yellow Sands, geologically now considered part of the Mursi Formation, containing fauna that is more than 4 million years old.

As a result of their somewhat primitive appearance and their possibly very old date, the human remains – Omo I and II (see chapter 1) – found by Leakey occupied a preeminent position in the interpretation of the origin of humanity. However, the uncertainty of their age made the assessment of their importance difficult. It is in that context that further work in the area was conducted between 1999 and 2003 by a team led by John Fleagle with the specific objective of establishing the exact provenience and age of the fossils and to collect further faunal and archaeological material. The most spectacular result of these expeditions was the dating of one

of the skulls to 195,000 years, which makes it the oldest anatomically modern human skull. This ancient date suggests that the landscape of the Lower Omo Valley was once the cradle of modern humankind.

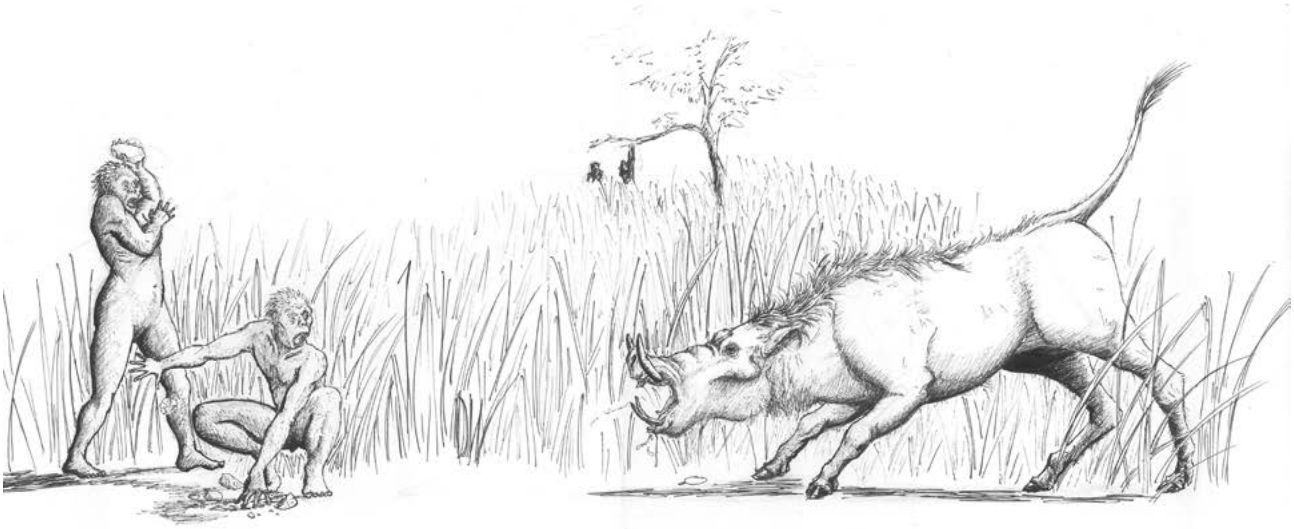
The Mursi Formation

The Mursi Formation, because of its age, remains of particular interest to science. The period prior to 4 million years ago is an important milestone in the evolution of hominins. It is the point at which the *Australopithecus* genus appears in the Omo Valley. *Australopithecus* is the oldest evolutionary taxon exhibiting well-documented, habitual bipedal locomotion and it is still believed to be the most likely ancestor to the genus to which we belong: *Homo*. The emergence of *Australopithecus* implies a rapid speciation event between 4.4 and 4.2 million years ago. Its ancestor, the *Ardipithecus* genus, identified in the Afar Depression of northeast Ethiopia, was well adapted to arboreality (life in the trees) and was omnivorous. *Australopithecus*, by contrast, represents a change in mode of locomotion and a shift in diet towards heavy chewing. Despite the importance of that time-period for our understanding of how the genus *Australopithecus* arose, very few localities of that age are identified in Africa. The Mursi sediments provide a unique opportunity to document that timeframe.

The earliest *Metridiochoerus* (Artiodactyla: Suidae) from the Usno Formation, Ethiopia (credit: Creative Commons)

Yet, hominins are not all that this formation is known for. The majority of fossil finds from this area are understandably of other animal species. From ancient elephant teeth to bovid horn cores, researchers are able to piece together what the environment of our ancestors and the animals they encountered might have looked like, as well as inform us about how they evolved to become the species we know today. Although there are many species represented in the valley's geological formations, suids stand out above all the rest. This is a species in the pig family that owing to their rapidly evolving lineages and great diversity are an excellent indicator of the age of sediments and the ecology of the lake-shore environments, particularly during the late Pliocene and early Pleistocene periods (between 3.5 and 1.5 million years ago) when hominins also became abundant and diverse. Many of the most informative fossil pigs were discovered in the Lower Omo Valley, including the earliest example of a genus known as *Metridiochoerus* from the Usno Formation, dated to approx. 3.5 million years ago. This species is thought to be the ancestor of modern warthogs, but would have been more than twice the size. A veritable meal for our earliest meat eating ancestors, as well as a potentially fierce and dangerous enemy if startled on the landscape.

Analysis of the fossils collected from the Mursi Formation in the 1960s and 1970s show that suids are more common than bovids (this includes buffalos, antelopes, sheep, goats, etc) and make up about half the assemblage. Since suids are usually associated to more closed habitats, this suggests that the Mursi environs were wooded at that time-period. Kanapoi, located at the southern tip of the Lake Turkana Basin and which



Artists representation of a confrontation between *Homo habilis* and *Metridiocherus* (credit: D. Warren)

has a similar age to the Mursi Formation, was characterised by semi-arid, possibly open conditions, within a variable ecosystem, including the likely presence of gallery forests. These dry conditions in the Turkana Basin relative to the wetter Lower Omo River mirror the variation reported for the later period of 3.4 to 2.0 million years ago. It has also been observed that fossil bovids from the Turkana Basin indicate a dryer climate than bovids from the Lower Omo Basin. Interestingly, though, another source of data from the Mursi Formation, fossil wood and pollen, signals a dryer environment than what is suggested by the fauna, leaving the question of the habitat in the Lower Omo valley prior to 4 million years unresolved.

Renewed Work in the Mursi Formation

It is in that context that paleontological work in the Mursi Formation was renewed in 2009 with the initial objective of determining whether non-explored sections of the Formation were also fossiliferous. Another locality at the northern tip of the exposed sediments was found. It contained fossil elephantids, suids, bovids, crocodiles, turtles, fish and wood. In very broad terms, the 2009 sample is similar to what was found in the

A view of Moyzu Valley, Mursiland (credit: M. Drapeau)

Yellow Sands 40 years earlier. The new sample is minuscule and does not allow for accurate habitat reconstruction, but large fish remains imply that there was a large body of water at proximity. Given the age of the sediments, it could have been the great Lonyumun Lake that around 4.2 million years ago is known to have covered the Lake Turkana Basin for over 100,000 years, or it could be a remnant course of the ancient Omo River that was already flowing in the area at that period. Further work is planned in this area which should help resolve whether the Lower Omo Valley did indeed have a wetter environment than other areas of the Lake Turkana Basin and, perhaps more importantly, whether early hominins exploited this environment.

Fossil of an unidentified fish discovered during survey in 2009 (credit: M. Drapeau)

Further Reading

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3. The Middle Stone Age of the Omo Delta-Turkana Basin

Huw Groucutt

Many people are surprised when they learn that for the vast majority of prehistory the only evidence for early humans consists of small pieces of broken rock. These flaked (or 'knapped') stones, however, offer a wealth of information on our ancestors. The ubiquity of these forms reflects both their importance in the lives of early humans (hence 'stone age'), but also their very high potential for preservation, in contrast to organic materials.

The Middle Stone age (henceforth MSA), dating to broadly 300,000 to 30,000 years ago, is the longest-lived archaeological (i.e. behavioural) manifestation of our species, *Homo sapiens*. Increasing evidence suggests a Pan-African origin of *Homo sapiens*, with palaeontological, genetic and archaeological data all indicating that our species evolved across much of the continent, instead of in a single small area.

In contrast to stone technologies of the Early Stone Age (ESA), which are characterised by large cutting tools such as handaxes, and those of the Later Stone Age (LSA), characterised by features such as bipolar and 'micro'-lithic technologies, stone tools of the MSA are focused on 'prepared core technologies'. One of these technologies, known as the Levallois method, involves careful shaping of nodules of rock (cores) such that flakes of predetermined shape can be removed using a hammerstone. Whereas ESA tools were made to be hand-held, MSA stone tools were often produced to be hafted, such as stone points mounted as spear tips. For the first time, there are strong indications of technological regionalisation across Africa during the MSA, putatively correlating with the spatial and temporal distribution of different human populations.

The Omo-Turkana basin has been best known for its Pliocene and Early Pleistocene geological formations and the fossils and artefacts found within them (see chapters 1 and 2). At the site of Lomekwi 3, West Turkana, the oldest known stone tools ever recovered, dating to around 3.3 million years ago, have recently been discovered by Sonia Harmand and colleagues. These are simple artefacts, but recognisably human-made. Subsequently, assemblages of the Oldowan are known in the Omo-Turkana basin, such as Lokalalei 2C dating to about 2.3 million years ago. While still technologically simple, these artefacts are more advanced than those from Lomekwi, and emphasise a consistent core and flake technology. From 1.8 million years ago, Acheulean assemblages, the earliest of which were found at Kokiselei 4, also in West Turkana, are characterised by hand-held large cutting tools, such as handaxes. Following the ESA, the MSA tool assemblages of the Omo-Turkana basin are less well known, yet given their association with the evolution of our species they are very significant.

In geographical terms, the Turkana-Omo Basin is an important region for studies of the MSA as it connects the two other main clusters of MSA sites in East Africa: one in northern Ethiopia (e.g. Aduma, Porc Epic, Herto, etc) and the other in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania (e.g. Mumba, Olorgesailie, etc). Understanding the

MSA of the Omo-Turkana Basin is therefore critical to elucidating long-term evolutionary and behavioural change in East Africa, which in turn is a pivot on which processes operated at a continental scale.

Lake Turkana

Several MSA assemblages are known from around Lake Turkana, as well as sites with important but poorly understood fossil remains. A skull from Eliye Springs (KNM ES-11693), for instance, potentially lies near the base of our species timeline, but is currently undated and was found out of context.

Amongst others, Alison Kelly's research on six MSA sites in the Koobi Fora area of East Turkana amassed only small assemblages (e.g. 39 artefacts at FwJi 1), with no assemblage producing more than 500 artefacts. However, from the description and illustration of these artefacts, they are similar to those of the MSA at Omo Kibish described below, with small artefacts generally produced by centripetal Levallois reduction of high quality raw materials.

Recent research on the MSA of West Turkana has been conducted by John Shea and Elisabeth Hildebrand. They found scattered evidence, which at Nakechichok 1 included a small assemblage of volcanic raw material and large Levallois-type flakes with unidirectional and bidirectional scar patterns (not dissimilar to those from Dirikoro in Ethiopia, discussed below), as well as cores with centripetal preparation. More recent work on the MSA of West Turkana has been undertaken by the 'In Africa' project.

The Lower Omo Valley

In contrast to the currently sparse published MSA record of Lake Turkana, the Kibish formation in southwest Ethiopia has produced several famous MSA assemblages. In addition to their association with hominin fossils, these assemblages are of considerable importance owing to their stratigraphically secure and chronometrically dated contexts. MSA material has been recovered from 'member I' of the Kibish Formation dating to around 195,000 years ago (at the AHS and KHS sites) and to 105,000 years ago within the 'member II/III' interface (at the BNS site).

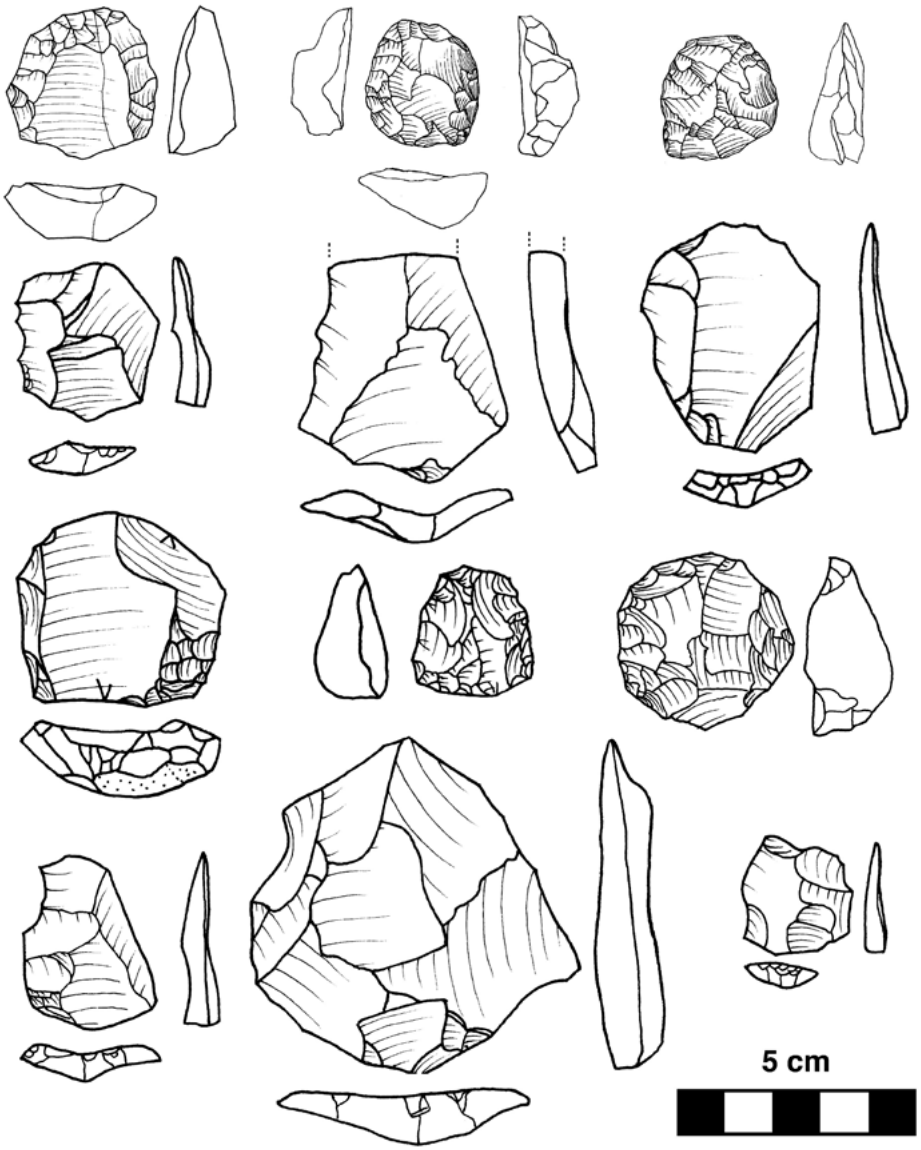
The dominant raw materials used in the Omo Kibish MSA assemblages are small pebbles of high quality cryptocrystalline silicates such as chert and jasper, which early humans selected from geologically diverse gravel deposits of former river beds. These pebbles were typically flaked using the Levallois technique, producing very small flakes. Retouched forms are not abundant but are typically flakes retouched on either side ('sidescrapers') or retouched into points.

An interesting aspect of the Omo Kibish assemblages seems to be a general typo-technological consistency for almost 100,000 years. This has been taken to perhaps indicate demographic stability in the area. This

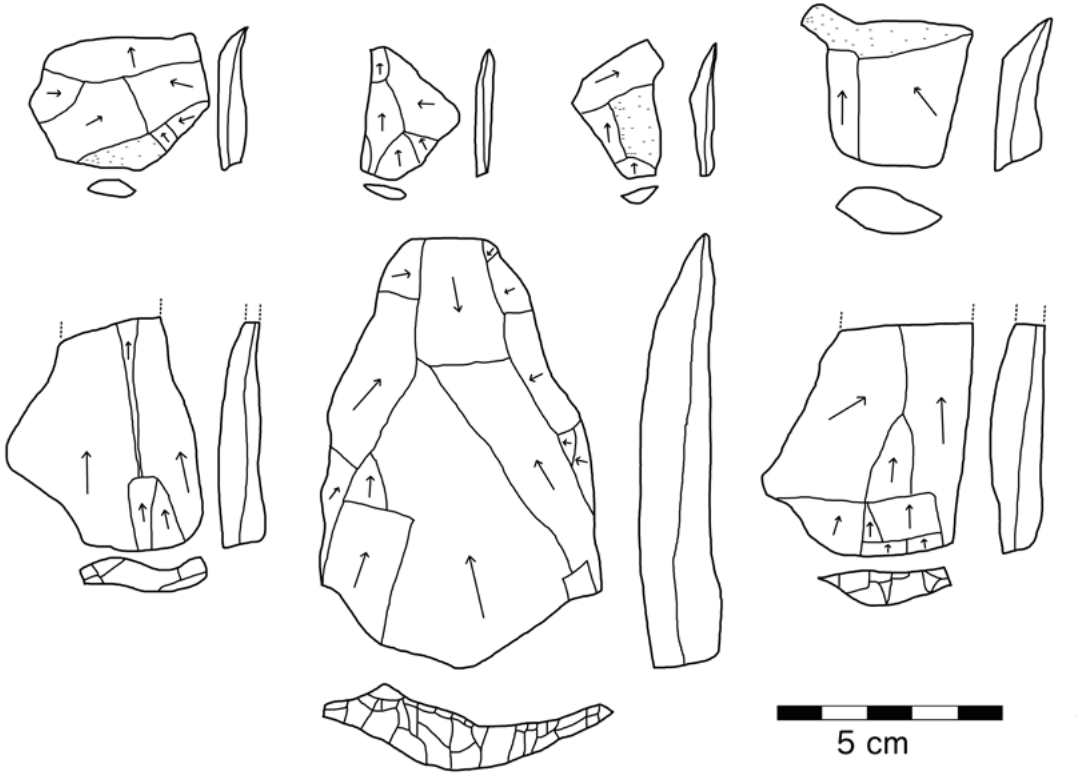
MSA artefacts from Omo Kibish showing the aesthetic appeal of such forms, not always evident in technical illustrations. The point in the middle is from BNS, dating to about 105,000 years ago, the others are surface finds (credit: H. Groucutt)

is certainly possible, and superficially there does seem to be less variability of the MSA in Ethiopia and perhaps East Africa more broadly than in other regions of Africa. This notion, however, needs to be tested quantitatively.

Occasional larger stone tools not produced from river gravels in the Omo Kibish assemblages indicate connections of these sites to the wider landscape. This offers a very interesting possibility of understanding



Middle Stone Age artefacts from Omo Kibish. Two top rows: AHS site, 195,000 years ago. Bottom two rows: BNS site, 105,000 years ago (credit: H. Groucutt)



Illustrations of MSA lithics from Dirikoro Waterfall Site 1, Lower Omo Valley, Ethiopia. Top row: preparation flakes. Bottom row: Levallois flakes. All artefacts are manufactured from green lava. Arrows show directions of previous removals. Hashed areas show cortical (unmodified) areas (credit: H. Groucutt)

the character of the Omo Kibish material, such as the extent to which the technological features may derive from constraints of the raw material itself. Such a possibility is inferred by stone tools recently documented as part of the Mursiland Heritage Project. Here, around the diverse volcanic geology of the Nkalabong Hills in Mursi territory, MSA artefacts have been collected both from across the landscape and from the significant Dirikoro Waterfall Site 1. The latter is situated at the headwaters of a branch of the River Elma, which itself feeds into the Omo River. A sample of artefacts was collected during preliminary investigations in 2010 and 2011, coming from the upper frame of a dynamic sedimentary sequence. Near pristine tools produced from green lava occur as simple flakes in an assortment of sizes, alongside Levallois flakes, showing on-site

knapping in a context not constrained by the use of small gravel as a raw material. Similarities with the material from Nakechichok 1 in West Turkana are evident, also displaying a similar technological diversity visible only when larger clasts of raw material are available. Further work here promises to elucidate an important MSA assemblage.

Outlook

It is clear that the Omo-Turkana Basin contains a rich MSA record and yet, given the fame of hominin fossils from the area, the extent to which this is currently understood is surprisingly limited. Further investigations and scientific dating of sites is needed. While the frequent Quaternary volcanic activity of the area must surely have been alarming for the valley's inhabitants, this has also resulted in the ability to date the volcanic tuffs within archaeological sites. Further research on the MSA, and the conservation needs of these rare and delicate sites, should be a priority over the coming years.

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4. The Later Prehistory of the Turkana Basin

Alex Wilshaw and Marta Mirazón Lahr

The striking evidence for humankind's earliest ancestors often eclipses studies of later periods. This is problematic for evidence from around Lake Turkana informs rich histories of hunter-gatherers, fisher-foragers and subsequently early pastoralists. What came next?

As the water of the Omo River slowly meanders south, it will eventually exhaust its time in the valley that channeled its path through southern Ethiopia and come to take on a different lease of life in northern Kenya, in a vast expanse of water once known as the Jade Sea. The Lake Turkana Basin is reputed for its rich

Central Island, Lake Turkana (credit: M. Lahr)

fossil record and, colloquially known as the Cradle of Humankind, has been an area of intense study into human prehistory.

Although today the people of these two regions are separated by a geo-political boundary, the river valley and the lake basin will be forever integral and forming part of the Great Rift Valley of eastern Africa that comprised our ancestral home for millennia. The nature of the geology and ecology of these two regions governed the movement of our ancestors across the landscape, and the area has borne witness to key moments in our evolution.

The Nariokotome Boy fossil, KNMT-WT 15000, from West Turkana, Kenya. This skull and associated skeleton is one of the most complete in the fossil record and belonged to a teenage boy who lived around 1.6 million years ago and is attributed to the species *Homo ergaster* (credit: A Wilshaw and Duckworth Collection, University of Cambridge)

When pondering such moments, it is easy to become distracted by the evidence for our earliest ancestors and to forget the role that this area played in making *Homo sapiens* into the humans that we recognise today. Stories of our first attempts to form functional stone tools at Lomekwi 3.3 million years ago, of the fate of a young *Homo ergaster* boy from Nariokotome 1.6 million years ago, or of the enigmatic Black Skull that represents the shortest-lived species of the robust Australopithecines (*Paranthropus boisei*), have overshadowed the record of our more immediate past. The hunter-gatherers and fisher-foragers of the African Humid Period (11,000-5,000 years ago), and the pastoralists that immediately followed them and largely surpassed them as they swept south through the Rift Valley corridor, have left a beautifully rich and lasting record on the landscape of Turkana that gives us unprecedented insights into the diversity of looks, lifestyles and cultures seen today in the peoples of eastern Africa and beyond.

The African Humid Period began as the last glaciations of the ice age drew to a close in Europe, and lasted for just over 6,000 years. Dramatic rises in rainfall and water-levels across north and east Africa, led to overflowing lakes and rivers that created an interconnected network of waterways from East to West, and into the Sahara

The landscape of West Turkana in a desert state (top), and during a wet period in modern times, resembling how it might have looked during the African Humid Period (bottom) (credit: M. Lahr)

desert, creating a 'Green Sahara' lush with vegetation and animals. Although it is difficult to imagine the greening of deserts, this process still takes place, albeit of very short duration, regularly during monsoonal rains.

Rift Valley lakes, like Nakuru-Naivasha, Baringo, and of course Lake Turkana, expanded to create novel resource-rich aquatic environments that were attractive to prehistoric hunter-gatherer groups who began to exploit them using new technologies as fisher-foragers. This adaptative landscape and the associated behaviour is sometimes referred to as the 'African Aqualithic' tradition, and left a distinct archaeological signature. Although many of the technological specialisations developed during this period have been obliterated by time – the nets and fish traps of wood, vine and twine that have long since rotted – others have become symbolic of the time when fisher-foragers lived across vast expanses of Africa. The bone harpoon is one such symbol. Small and large, with one or many barbs cut into up to three rows, bone harpoons have been found from Nigeria to Kenya to

A bone harpoon embedded in shell concretions (credit: A. Wilshaw)

A bone harpoon from West Turkana, Kenya (credit: A. Wilshaw)

A palaeo-beach in the desert: the shell line of Kalakol 8, West Turkana (credit: A. Wilshaw)

the Central Sahara and the Nile Valley. In the Turkana Basin, bone harpoons are the trademark of this period, and give us insights into the fisher-forager communities that lived at sites such as Kibish, Nataruk, Lothagam, Lopoi and Koobi Fora.

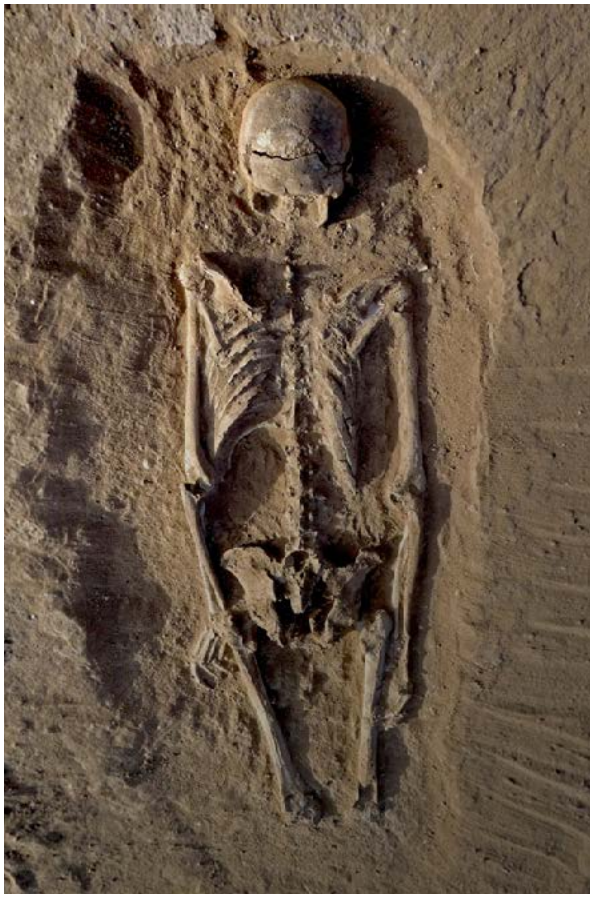
Lothagam is one of the most well-known sites and lies to the south western edge of Lake Turkana. Like many sites from the African Humid Period, the white shells that once formed an extensive beach now stretch into the desert sands – a reminder that the lake once sat much higher than it does today. Excavations at Lothagam in the 1970s revealed more than 280 barbed bone harpoons and bone points, as well as stone tools and human burials of those that must have returned each year to fish Nile perch (some of which were in excess of 250 kilograms) and hunt aquatic mammals, like hippopotamuses that frequented the shoreline.

Although this new adaptation was successful, life would still not necessarily have been kind for the people of the Aqualithic. The humid peaks were punctuated by periods of aridity that saw the decline of resources and made access to the lake fishing grounds all the more prized. This resulted in fierce competition between groups, as those whose resources had depleted sought to survive and came into conflict with the groups tethered to resources in other areas. Examples such as the massacre at Nataruk, where more than 26 men, women and children were brutally killed in what is described as the earliest example of warfare, are likely the victims of such competition. The tell-tale signs of conflict are seen at multiple sites, for example at Lothagam, where skeleton LO18 was found with an obsidian multi-barbed projectile point found still embedded in his foot, or at Kalakoel 4, where the

skeleton of a woman was found with an obsidian arrow tip embedded in her spine, in both cases injuries that occurred shortly before death.

During the most severe periods of aridity, such that occurred around 8,200 years ago, prehistoric populations seem to disappear from the archaeological record altogether. One of the most pressing questions today is what happened to the people of the Aqualithic during these phases of apparent absence? Did they find refuge elsewhere? Did they move north to the running waters of the Omo River? Were those who re-populated the area during times of abundance the same as those who left?

There are still a small number of fisher-foragers who subsist on the shores of Lake Turkana today, such as the El Molo. However, the fisher-forager lifestyle has nearly disappeared. Whether as a cause of this decline, or a result of it, a new way of life began to dominate the landscape following the African Humid Period: that of pastoralism.



The skeleton of KNM-WT-71264, a male killed at the site of Nataruk, West Turkana (credit: M. Lahr)

Today, pastoralist groups are found across sub-Saharan Africa. Well-known tribes like the Turkana, the Maasai, and the Samburu are all pastoralists, and their way of life descends from those who brought the earliest domesticated animals into the region around 5,000 years ago. The domestication of animals allowed early pastoralist groups to expand rapidly using the advantage they gained from daily access to milk and meat. From an area in modern-day southern Sudan, the early pastoralists pushed south, using the Great Rift Valley as a corridor, at a time when only hunter-gatherers and fisher-foragers lived across most of Africa.

The Turkana Basin, as the head of that corridor, shows some of the earliest evidence of these pastoralist groups in sub-Saharan Africa. Although, like their descendants today, they were largely nomadic, they built special places, some of which are preserved at sites such as Kalakol and Lothagam. Unlike earlier hunter-gatherer-fisher populations, the pastoralists left their mark on the landscape – they erected great

monuments of pillars on both sides of the lake, known as *Namoratunga* in the Swahili language, formed circles and raised platforms of stone and buried their dead with grave goods and jewellery under cairns that can be easily spotted adorning the rocky ridges of the landscape.

This outward exhibition of ritual was accompanied by an extensive use of pottery decorated in a variety of ways, as well as flourishing use of personal ornamentation in the form of stone and shell beads and pendants. This tradition of diverse and often colourful personal ornamentation can be seen today among their descendants for whom herding remains their main way of life.

The Turkana Basin lies at the heart of the human African story. From the time, millions of years ago, when our ancestors looked and behaved in ways that we would not recognize, to the very first groups of human hunters 200,000 years ago, to the more recent communities of fisher-foragers and pastoralists of the last 10,000 years, the 'Jade Sea' was their home, and the bones and stones preserved along its shores offer us exceptional glimpses of our shared past.

From top to bottom: fish drying in a modern day El Molo fishing village; Nadupunan Lengutuk, one of the last surviving El Molo to remember many of the old traditions; fish drying on a rack in a modern El Molo village (credit: J. Jeffery)

The *Namoratunga* or Pillar Site of Kalakol, West Turkana (credit: M. Lahr)

A stone circle structure, left behind by early pastoralists (credit: A. Wilshaw)

Diverse pottery types from the early pastoralist site of Aliel, West Turkana, Kenya (credit: A. Wilshaw)

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Part 2: Pastoral Pasts – Entering History

A Mursi warrior squats and contemplates a stone platform recently cleared of soil and vegetation (credit: T. Clack)

5. Environment Histories - The Last 2,000 Years

Graciela Gil-Romera and Miguel Sevilla-Callejo

Climate change is of global scientific, policy and popular interest. How has the environment of the Lower Omo Valley changed and how can these understandings inform conservation efforts? What are parts of the Lower Omo's environment like today?

Environmental History

Under the current scenario of global change, long-term environmental studies are crucial to understanding how landscapes have changed through time and the forces that shape them. Understanding environmental history enables conservation managers to determine the natural ranges of variation linked to an ecosystem and informs the degree to which a region may be under environmental threat. This is particularly important in pre-industrial societies, where humans generally have a lower impact on natural surroundings than in industrialized societies, and whereby the integration of local ecological knowledge with scientific ecological knowledge could lead to important advances in nature conservation.

One of the most interesting aspects of past environmental change is fluctuations in vegetation character. Vegetation cover establishes many interconnections across environmental factors in a landscape – biodiversity, animal life, livelihoods, and retained water in the soil – which feed back and forth between one another. Thus, understanding the ecological history of the Lower Omo Valley is integral to improved nature conservation and the improvement of human livelihoods.

Until recently there was no reliable record of environmental change for this region, which is often the case across the African continent. During our own research we obtained a record of vegetation change from a place in Mursiland called Dewachaga. This record was obtained by an innovative approach: analyzing the fossilised pollen content of hyrax middens. These animals tend to accumulate biogenic material (urine and faeces) in a consistent way, and since the pollen of every plant is different, once it becomes fossilized in these sediments, it becomes a rich and detailed record of past vegetation – perhaps covering several millennia – that we can identify in the laboratory, and directly date by radiocarbon analysis.

The study showed that the range of vegetation species in the Dewachaga area has broadly remained unchanged during the last 2,000 years. However, change in terms of species abundance was clearly evident, showing different combinations of wood and grass vegetation. Some areas of Mursiland have clearly experienced abrupt fluctuations from very open landscapes to those encroached by bushes and trees. There are several likely causes for these changes, both naturally and human-induced. These include differences in degree of rainfall, frequency of fires, and the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide.

Vegetation types in the Lower Omo Valley. From left to right, top to bottom: Omo River flanked by the typical dense riverine vegetation, where tall trees with a thick canopy cover the area; open savannah, where trees are scattered, and grasses dominate the area; tree savannah, where the tree:grass ratio is almost 1; thick savannah, where the grass layer has almost disappeared (credit: G. Gil-Romera)

Rock hyraxes (*Procavia capensis*) in Ethiopia's Bale Mountains (credit: G. Gil-Romera)

Perhaps more important than the causes of variation is the high resilience that this landscape shows against change. The landscape of Mursiland has changed markedly over the last 2,000 years, but not in an irreversible way: the savannah has neither remained entirely open grassland, nor totally covered by woody species. Of importance here is that the landscape has successfully absorbed different types and scales of environmental impact and, although it may have temporarily changed in composition and form, it has always returned close to a previous state. This may help to explain why, long-term, many East African pastoral societies have proved so well adapted to unpredictable landscape changes.

This study considered only the impact on the environment of the pre-industrial land use practices of the Mursi ethnic group, and others before them in a single location. We cannot predict with precision what human-induced impacts may occur in the coming years, since these stem from impact sources that the landscape has never before been subject to. This includes the elimination of the Omo River's annual flood,

From top to bottom; Location of hyrax midden analysed to obtain a vegetation record; view of a hyrax midden and biogenic accumulation (credit: G. Gil-Romera)

now controlled upstream following the completion of the Gibe III hydro-electric dam, which has increased the river's large-scale irrigation potential needed to feed the vast areas being converted by outside multinational agencies into sugar cane plantations.

Mursi Today

The area inhabited by Mursi lies entirely in tropical Africa, within the Omo River Basin, and is partly included within the borders of the Omo and Mago National Parks. The Omo River is the only feeding source of water to Lake Turkana, where the river debouches and constitutes an essential axis for the ecosystem, including human activities (cultivation, fishing, herding etc). The tropical location of the river, especially its lowest section, implies that the valley is subject to a bimodal rainfall system. That is, predictable dry and wet seasons integral to Mursi economic activities (see chapter 15), since agriculture and vegetation are limited by water availability.

Climate

In its lower section, the Omo Valley presents a main wet season between March and April and a minor one between October and November when inter-annual rainfall variability tends to be greater than during the main rainy season. The only meteorological station in the area with a good data record is in the town of Jinka, which registers annual rainfall of 1200 mm. However, since rainfall lessens with decreasing latitude and altitude, the degree of precipitation diminishes in the lower section of the Omo River. So although water is not a limiting factor for life near the river, as distance from the river increases, so too does the aridity of the dry season.

The daily temperature gradient in this section of the river mainly varies with altitude. In its most elevated sections the differences between day and night temperatures are more apparent. The importance of this gradient decreases with proximity towards the Equator, but the mean average temperature becomes much higher, reaching the hottest level (upwards of 45 degrees Celsius) at the Omo delta into Lake Turkana.

Climate also becomes a limiting factor for soil development, and in Mursiland a variety of soils appears as water input varies. The most developed, nutrient-rich soil is found close to the Omo River. The remainder of the area is mainly dominated by weakly developed soils, generally poor for cultivation, but replete with grasses on which livestock can feed.

Vegetation and Wildlife

There are two main groups of vegetation in Mursiland. The first is the riverine forest, near to the river, which contains a high biodiversity of trees, shrubs, and lianas, that form a thick canopy. Here, grass cover

is almost non-existent due to the presence of grazing animals. Away from the river, the environment is dominated by a range of different savannah types, again depending on water content and soil types. This, the second vegetation group, is characterised by a continuous herbaceous cover with woody vegetation of varied abundance but never forming a closed canopy such as in a forest. The different types of savannah are therefore classified by their relative abundance of woody vegetation and decreasing presence of grasses: open, tree, thick and encroached savannah. Each of these is present in Mursiland, forming a mosaic that defines the spatial distribution of people's different livelihoods.

A relatively high animal diversity is found in Mursiland, especially amongst birds. Whilst mammal richness is not as high as is observed in other protected areas of Africa, the variety of landscape types, each relatively well preserved, equates with niches of great faunal variety that with conservation programmes based on local knowledge and collaboration with Mursi partners could potentially be regenerated.

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6. Archaeology of Pastoralism and Monumentality in the Omo Valley

Marcus Brittain and Timothy Clack

Recent archaeological investigations in the Lower Omo Valley have focused upon the changing character of human occupation in more recent times, particularly the last 400 years. The results have been startling, notably uncovering complex traditions of ceremonial practice that create and utilise impressive stone architecture, durable to this day. Importantly, echoes of this tradition continue into the present.

Though famed for its fossil record and palaeontological studies of hominin and early human development, the archaeology of the Lower Omo Valley of the last 10,000 years has, if at all, received only rare attention. This certainly is the case for the territory occupied by the Mursi. This oversight may in part be owed to the valley's challenging terrain which can hinder both access and ground survey. But perhaps a more likely explanation lies within two perceptions. The first claims that mobile herding communities in East Africa leave little material trace and have little connection to traditions of monument building, which are more usually associated with cereal cultivators. The second is a repeated claim, voiced mainly through administration and policy makers, that the Omo and Mago National Parks that now frame large parts of Mursi territory are a natural wilderness, and that existing human populations are recent interlopers whose impact is detrimental to its 'pristine' condition.

The first of these claims, which has traditionally stemmed from within archaeology itself, has gradually become eroded, initially by investigations of large stone ('megalithic') pillar sites around Kenya's Lake Turkana, found to have been erected by and integral to the social relations of herding communities during the second half of the fifth millennium BC (see chapter 4). Similarly, work in Ethiopia's Lower Omo Valley has also shown that mobile communities that practice a mixture of horticulture and pastoralism have also engaged in the building of large stone shrines for at least the last four hundred years and continue to do so today.

Much of the evidence from the Lower Omo Valley which forms the basis of this chapter is the product of recent investigations by the Mursiland Heritage Project, which is a collaboration of the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and USF, Valencia, working closely with local communities and Ethiopia's Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage. The project has identified many new archaeological sites of the Middle and Late Stone Age in Mursi territory, as well as an important record for the last 400 years, the accumulation of which challenges the second of the claims above, by showing that the valley's supposedly 'natural' character is inseparable from human influence, which is longstanding.

The project's core geographic focus is an area of Mursi territory centred upon a rocky spur called Arichukgirong, which projects northwards from the larger Dara range of hills. A number of remarkable

discoveries have been made around Arichukgirong, particularly where it slopes into the flat open grass plain of the Elma River – a perennial waterway that connects the highland to the Omo River. Amongst the more unusual discoveries are a series of enigmatic stone platforms – some of monumental proportions – that local Mursi refer to as *benna kulugto*, which in literal translation means 'to encircle an area (*kulugto*) with stones (*benna*)'. The circles are also sometimes referred to as *benna be zou oudjio bekingingi* ('stones people put there a long time ago'), which registers a much deeper, ancestral quality. Using a combination of archaeological evidence and oral histories recounted by local elders we know that these circles have lain undisturbed for between 200 and 400 years, and appear to have played a role in multiple practices, including some that involved the sacrifice of cattle.

Largely hidden by a thin layer of soil, the platforms could easily be mistaken for just another instance of geological phenomena in this diverse volcanic landscape. But they are recognisable by arcs of carefully spaced stones at ground level that, upon removal of the soil coverage, form multiple concentric rings. Some stones are long with flat rectangular surfaces, their edges and corners rounded by water action, having probably derived from a nearby river bed. Other stones are irregular boulders, large and small; their surfaces sometimes pitted and weathered and sharp to the touch, others merely blunted by the elements and wind-blown sand. A striking feature of each platform was the interruption of the stone rings by a gulley inset with a line of stones, often larger than the others, and always oriented northwest, irrespective of the platforms' location within the landscape.

Twenty-five of these so-called *benna kulugto* platforms have so far been identified. Their size varies from 2m to 26m diameter, and rarely are they found in isolation. At least nine platforms were recorded in one cluster alone, and there are no doubt many others that are yet to be found.

When the platforms were first encountered by the project in 2009 (the first non-local to note their existence was British anthropologist David Turton in the late 1960s) a simple question was posed: are these surfaces or containers? Across East Africa are various instances of stone platforms that had been erected to cover a burial, acting as a funerary marker as well as a means to contain the dead. Sometimes the burial platforms also took on a role in the commemoration of the ancestors. In a similar way, could the *benna kulugto* platforms serve both functions: container for the dead, and surface to commemorate the ancestors? The question was resolved by four seasons of detailed archaeological excavation which revealed that beneath the platforms was undisturbed ground. Whatever their purpose, these platforms were built to be used at the ground surface.

Between the stones of all except the largest platform are pieces of bone, much of which has been heavily calcined by fire and then deliberately crushed or ground into small fragments. Concentrations of this bone are greatest towards the platforms' centres. Placed at the centre of one platform was a pair of articulated cattle feet untouched by fire, but amongst a mass of other burnt fragments. Cattle are the only species that has been found so far, with a preference seemingly for limbs that bear low-meat value.

Photographs of Dirikoro prior to (below) and after (above) archaeological clearance (credit: T. Clack)

Photograph and plan of two *benna kulugto* platforms (credit: T. Clack and M. Brittain)

Analyses of the chemical properties of soil collected from different points across one of the platforms presented an interesting pattern. Chemical signatures consistent with phosphate were again greatest towards the centre of the platform, reducing to comparatively low values at the platform's edge. High values are conducive with nitrogen enrichment of the soil. In the context of the platform's environment there are few obvious ways in which such localised enrichment may occur, but the spilling of blood and other bodily contents could certainly have done this, perhaps either as part of an offering or resulting from the dispatch of a sacrificial cow. Communities living in Mursiland today may sacrifice a cow as part of a special occasion, such as an initiation into adulthood (see chapter 12) or in the build-up to war; sacrifice may also be employed as an aid to curing ill health or drought.

Determining the age of the platforms and their duration of use is not straightforward. Radiocarbon dating of the bone at least illustrates that these could have been first used in the seventeenth century. In traditional Mursi oral history, five of their ancestral clans gradually migrated north or northeast across the Omo River towards their present territory at the close of the nineteenth century. Precipitated by increased aridity and environmental

From left to right and top to bottom. Archaeologists excavate a *benna kulugto* under observation of Mursi locals; centre and gulley of one of the *benna kulugto* platforms; recording heights of archaeological deposits; Alberto Arzoz recording *benna kulugto* by photogrammetry (credit: M. Brittain and T. Clack)

stress (for which there is reliable scientific evidence), this movement into a 'cool place' was, according to the Mursi, a violent one that involved the forced displacement of the inhabitant population to whom the platforms may have belonged. If this history is accurate, then the platforms may have fallen into disuse by the end of the nineteenth century.

There is an alternative oral history concerning this population change, which has important implications for an understanding of the platforms. This tradition of oral history belongs to the Bodi, which is the descendent group of the clans supposedly forced from the land by the invading Mursi. In Bodi oral histories a premeditated exit northward from Arichukgirong had already been enacted prior to the Mursi arrival on account of the land's poor grass quality on which their cattle were fed. Adding to this, Bodi state that the clan that resided in the land around Arichukgirong was one of three authentic precursor clans – the Ajit – that make up the proto group from which today's Bodi originate. Of importance here is that the descendant line of this proto-group represents one of five clans from which the office of *komorot* ('priest') may be appointed. A feature of today's *komorot* is their direct link to the use of stone platforms used within Bodi settlements. Although the character of these is very different to the *benna kulugto*, they nonetheless serve as a useful guide for thinking about the role and function of past and present stone platforms in the Lower Omo Valley (see chapter 18). It is significant, for example, that cow sacrifice features as one practice connected to the Bodi platforms.

Could the high number of *benna kulugto* platforms, as well as their sheer size, correlate with an intensification of the ceremonial tempo and activities motivated by threats either from the worsening climate or an aggressive migrant population, or perhaps both?

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7. Global Artefacts: The Pastoral Past in Museums

Juan Salazar Bonet and Timothy Clack

Pastoralist communities from the Lower Omo Valley are not the only holders of their material heritage. Since the late nineteenth century, travellers, scientists and collectors have acquired hundreds of objects from the region and have employed them to project several powerful narratives about otherness.

It is possible to recognise three periods in the Western acquisition of material culture from the Lower Omo Valley. The first period, from 1886 to 1926, was characterised by colonial geographical exploration. Various scientific expeditions and hunting trips crossed the valley at that time, collecting numerous objects on their way. It was also in the late nineteenth century that the region was conquered and annexed by the Ethiopian army of Emperor Menelik II. He later established the frontier with the British colony of the East African Protectorate there, which would complicate access to the area by outsiders.

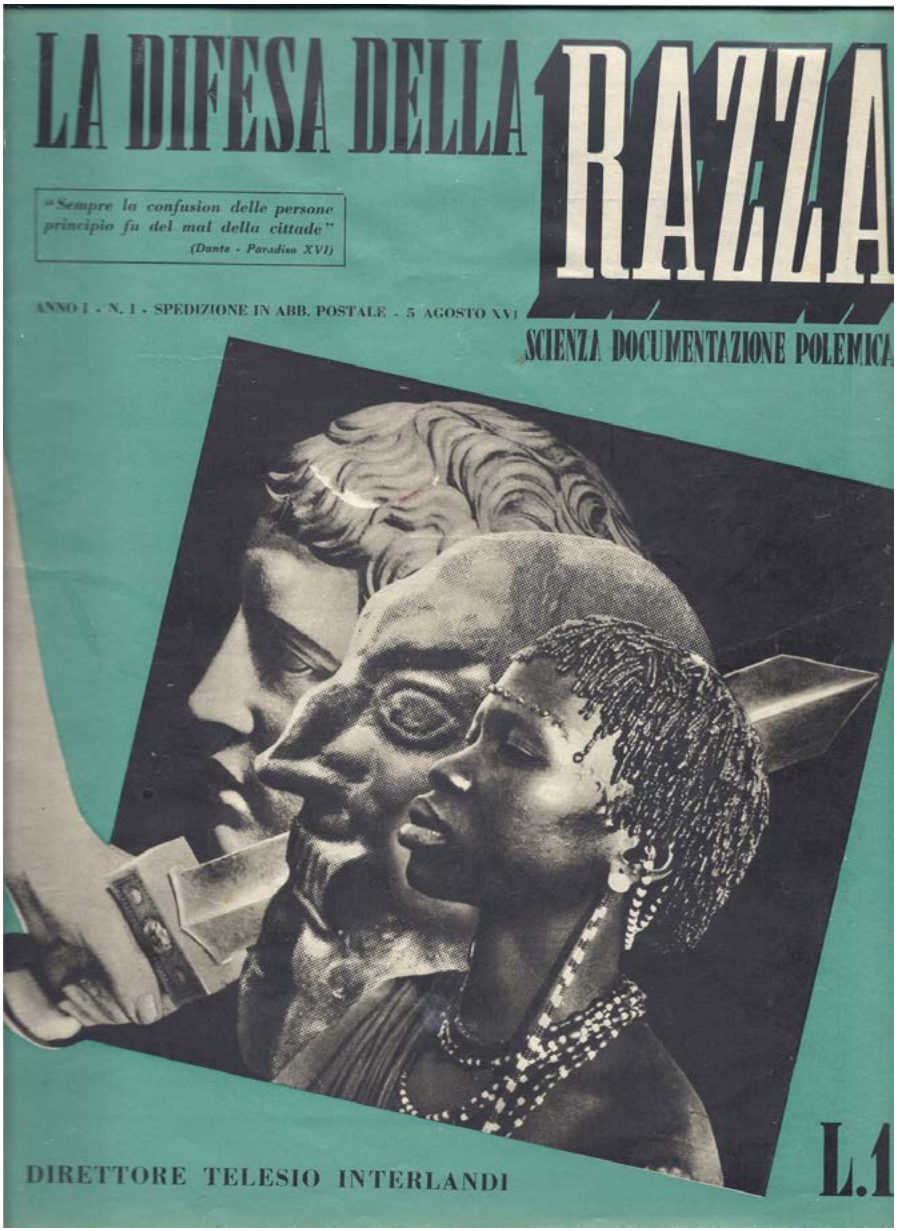
The second period, from 1927 to 1967, was marked in part by the military occupation of Ethiopia by the Italian army (1936-1941). During this period, southwest Ethiopia and its inhabitants became the subject of renewed scientific interest, and more objects were studied and collected by various expeditions. Finally, the third and last period, from 1968 to the present, has seen long-term international anthropological projects in the Lower Omo Valley, which have facilitated the acquisition of new material assemblages.

Between 1887 and 1888, Count Sámuel Teleki and Ludwig Ritter von Höhnel were the first Europeans to map Lake Turkana (then Lake Rudolf) and the Omo River estuary. During their expedition, they acquired approx. 400 objects. This first collection is today held at the Ethnographic Museum in Budapest, Hungary, and the Museum of Natural History in Vienna, Austria. Similar to collections displayed in late nineteenth-century European museums, these objects were presented as empirical evidence of the technological stages of humankind and, particularly, juxtaposed Western 'civilization' to African 'savagery'.

Special interest was placed on two types of objects: adornments and weapons. The former offered a reliable identification of the encountered people and the latter responded to the consideration of fighting as a universal human instinct, which was connected to natural selection. Therefore, weaponry development reflected a marked hierarchy in which industrialised weapons and people were positioned above the rest. These objects were thus at once representative and legitimising of colonial projects.

In 1939, during the Italian occupation, Edoardo Zavattari and Marcello Ricci participated in the *Missione Biologica Sagan-Omo della R. Accademia d'Italia* ('Sagan-Omo Biological Mission of the Italian Academy'). They donated to the Pigorini in Rome 122 objects that they had obtained from several populations of the

Dasanech shield from the Neprajzi Muzeum, Hungary (credit: J. Bonet)



Cover of an Italian colonial magazine

Hamar objects collected by Marcello Ricci in 1939

Lower Omo Valley. A decade later, between 1950 and 1952, a German expedition lead by Adolf E. Jensen and other anthropologists travelled across southwest Ethiopia. This second expedition recorded and collected hundreds of objects that were deposited at the Frobenius-Institut, Frankfurt.

Both the Italian and the German ethnographical expeditions were the earliest to undertake a systematic programme of artefact collection in the area, incorporating the acquisition of complete sets of local items. Artefact classification was sensitive to linguistic, cultural and territorial classifications. Unsurprisingly, the framework of Italian fascism also employed race, language and material culture as criteria to legitimise their colonial occupation of parts of the Horn of Africa. Nevertheless, as well as providing an outstanding historical resource, the objects deposited at the Frobenius-Institut helped sustain the academic concept of 'cultural areas' (in the sense of cultural groups being spatial entities with boundaries) as well as insight regarding cultural and material capacity to reflect outside influences, migrations, dynamism and persistence.

Bodi artefacts recorded by Eike Haberland in 1951

The arrival of several anthropologists during the 1960s and 1970s initiated the most recent period of material culture collection in the Lower Omo Valley. The collections acquired, particularly during the last decades of the twentieth century, were deposited at different museums across the globe. For example, Serge Tornay, who worked among the Nyangatom, presented, in 1975, 21 of their objects at a temporal exhibition in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, France; Katsuyoshi Fukui donated 32 objects from the Bodi in 1977 to the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Japan; and between 1969 and 1986, David Turton co-ordinated the collection of 61 Mursi objects that were deposited at the Manchester Museum, UK. Most recently, the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervulen, Belgium, accessioned hundreds of artefacts from the Lower Omo Valley collected by the museum's curator, Gustaaf Verswijver.

Mursi stone bracelet from the Manchester Museum (credit: J. Bonet)

Various African institutions also acquired objects from the Lower Omo Valley during this period of activity. The Anthropology Museum of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for example, organized and funded its own collection of material culture. Also, after years of fieldwork among the Hamar, Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall organized the first local museum in the Lower Omo Valley region, for which they acquired objects of neighbouring communities. This institution, the South Omo Research Centre (SORC) in the town of Jinka, has developed numerous projects articulated through the region's diverse material culture and heritage.

During each of the periods of collection, scientists and curators have, through exhibitions, employed objects to project their own perspectives on the inhabitants of the Lower Omo Valley. These have aligned with the pervading academic and popular understandings of the day. Voluntarily or not, and regardless of the epoch, objects and exhibitions have been used to strengthen a series of value-laden readings associated with the communities from the area. Since the late nineteenth century, these have included narratives of isolation, timelessness and backwardness. Fortunately, more recent anthropological collections have challenged these views. Instead of promoting images of stasis and primitivity, these have recognised the innovation, meaning and complexity inherent within these collections.

Display of Mursi material culture at SORC, Ethiopia (credit: J. Bonet)

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Part 3: Pastoral Presents – The Mursi

A Mursi priest standing in a stone circle anoints a boy with a potent substance during a *biolama* ceremony in 2010 (credit: T. Clack)

8. Who are the Mursi?

David Turton and Lugulointheno Jordomo

All ethnic groups have narratives of origins. Charged symbolically and in dialogue with legitimacy, ownership and relationships, these narratives offer insight into processes of becoming. Mursiland is at once a place of arrival, ownership, religious significance and sustenance. Who are the Mursi? Where do they come from?

The story begins with a journey, a journey of around 30 km as the crow flies, which took place around two hundred years ago. Those who made it were not Mursi. They were living at the time in the Dirka hills in what is now the Omo National Park, along with the ancestors of today's Chai.

Probably because they were experiencing a period of drought, or conflict with their neighbours, or both, they decided to leave Dirka, in search of a new home, east of the Omo (*Warr*). Although they had only a short distance to travel, the journey was not without risks. They had to take their cattle across the biggest river any of them had seen and then face an uncertain reception from the people whom they knew lived on the other bank. These included the Kwegu, a group of hunters who see themselves and are seen by others as the original inhabitants of the Omo, and the Bodi (Me'en) who are now the northern neighbours of the Mursi.

But the move was successful. Having crossed the river at a place called Dorl and established a foothold in the south of present-day Mursiland, they slowly made the land their own, parcelling out stretches of the river bank amongst themselves. Some of the people already living there were intimidated into leaving, while others were incorporated into what eventually became a new ethnic group, with the self-name, Mun. The group is now known by a variety of names to others – Taama to the Bodi, Ngi-kaalabong to the Nyangatom, Murso to the Kara, Mun to the Chai, Muruz to the Dasanech, and Mursi to highland agriculturalists, the government and the world at large.

A short journey then, probably made initially by a relatively small group of people, but one with big consequences, amounting to nothing less than the 'making' of the Mursi. Not surprisingly, it has become the subject of one of the best known and most frequently told stories in Mursi oral tradition. Below is a version of the story told by the late Lugulointheno Jordomo in 1996. A member of the Bumai clan, he was then aged about 50 and was one of the most politically active and historically knowledgeable men of the then recently created Geleba age set.

We take up the story after Lugulointheno had explained that, at the time in question, the ancestors of the Mursi were living at Dirka and watering their herds at a hot spring, called Shaura, in the nearby grass plain. It happened that two particular bulls started to go missing, every day, when the rest of the cattle were taken

Photograph taken in 1991 of a stone circle (*ngauwo*) at Benikorra, on the east bank of the Omo, a few kilometres south of Dorl. The large acacia (*sholbi*) in the right background was standing when the ancestors of the Mursi first crossed the Omo from the west, in the early 19th century (credit: D. Turton)

to drink at Shaura, only to reappear later in the day. One of these bulls was owned by a man called Tongokuri, of the Juhai clan, which happened to be the clan of Lugulointheno's mother. The other was owned by a man called Bule, of the Komorte clan, a clan from which the main politico-ritual leaders, or priests, of the Mursi are drawn. From this opening mystery – where were the bulls going to drink? – the narrative leads us to a resolution in which the ancestors of today's Mursi 'find' the Omo River, cross it by magical means and take possession not only of their present territory but also of their Mursi identity.

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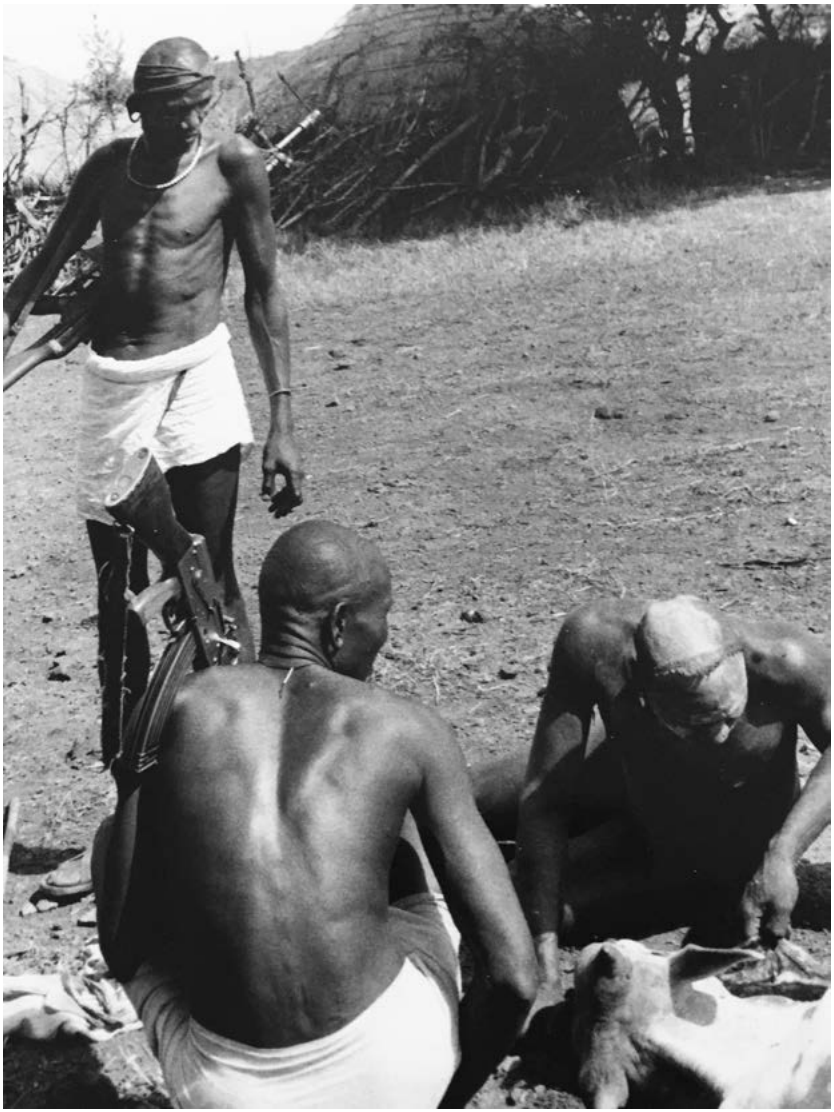

Lugulointheno Jordomo casts an eye over some younger men who are about to drink the blood of a sacrificial ox before skinning and roasting it at a public ritual in 1996 (credit: D. Turton)

Lusi a Tongokuri seathe shune ke 'Harle beg uli!'
Tongokuri told his son,'Watch that bull!'

Ina komoruin seathe shune ke, 'Harle beg uli!'.
The Priest told his son, 'Watch that bull!'

'Na huli uli genee na bio wheni, bhwe dhoi uliyoye – koba ne bhwe mate arra!'
'When the bull is grazing, and the cattle come [to drink], watch where it goes – follow it and see where it drinks'

Beku dirr na huli bio dongchinyana nga, uli choi dorogi, hash!
[Tongokuri's son] watched the bull carefully and, when the cattle came to drink, it crashed off into the bush, *hash!*

Kobu dirr – ina Tongokuri. Bunathe zuo. Irru mai-ni.
He kept on following it until it reached a place [on the Omo] where there were people. That's where it drank.

Arte ko zuo nga tana – Nydi. Nyidi el nga tana.
And he saw people on this side [the east bank] – Kwegu. There were Kwegu on this side.

'Kuduma hiri nano, eee!'
'I've found [someone to be] my man!' [said Tongokuri's son].

'Kuduma inye so!'
'I've found you!' [replied a Kwegu].

'Na nga bi-a?'
'So what about this bull?' [asked Tongokuri's son].

'A bi kaje anyoi ma nga chir'.
'It's my bull – I always bring it here to drink' [said the Kwegu].

Uli a komoruin koiye – koi ko lusi bunthathen Warro nganga.
The same thing happened with the Priest's bull – it also went as far as the Omo, followed by the Priest's son.

Daino togoin lorna ma gussioni.
In the evening the boys drove the bulls back, carrying water in their gourds.

'Wa ulinya kopto na au tordo ori?'
'Did you follow the bulls?' asked the people. 'Did you see where they went?'

'Ulinya wa aita na aita mai pu rammai, el tui nga'.
'They kept on going until they got to a really long river, over there' said the boys.

'Ma a meri?'
'Was there a lot of water?'

'He! A meri so. Mai pu rammai huli kogwin nga, hey nganga teee hung – ba nga dhoneo.'
'A lot of water? It's such a long river you can't see where it ends.'

Daino zuo mezedoni. Mezeeee...na sene ke 'Harle belle kete zigini'.
So in the evening the people debated. They kept on debating until eventually they decided to move. 'Let's leave at dawn' they said.

Belle zuo ziwone hung-ni, buuu.
In the morning they all set off together.

Na when na Dorlo tano elane bai, na chibe mora, mora,mora.
And when they got to Dorl, on the west bank of the Omo, they stopped and tethered all the calves.

Bio el whuin. Zuo el whuin.
The cattle didn't drink [from the Omo]. The people didn't drink [from the Omo].

Bage debi.
The people smeared clay on their bodies.

Na kiwana hiri. Kaje berr – berr-a ma.
They chose a man and gave him a spear – a man's spear.

Kabathen debi a korra na kubuti hugio.
He smeared black clay on his body and red clay on the blade of the spear.

Eden kiangi wush – dhobwe berr – orr berr.
He raised his arm and aimed the spear four times.

Berr koi na kon kio tano – dhobwano tano na kon kio nga tana, tomotheyo.
He threw the spear from over there [on the west bank] and it hit a *tomothey* tree on this bank.

Hir-aga dug ma.
Then he walked into the river.

Huli dug ma nga, bodine ke kio hula nga kita nga.
When he got into the river, he turned into a tree – just like this one here.

Ngani zuo dhone gora wa dhone hirio hung.
Then the people followed him into the river.

Ma kenchabwe na te hula nga ba nga.
And when they got into the river, the waters parted and it became dry land, like it is here.

Ma kedhu hung-ni – nga gia nga au nga, gia au nga.
The waters just parted – some went in one direction and some went in the other.

A logo hang – Mun a berari so!
That's what really happened – the Mursi are powerful!

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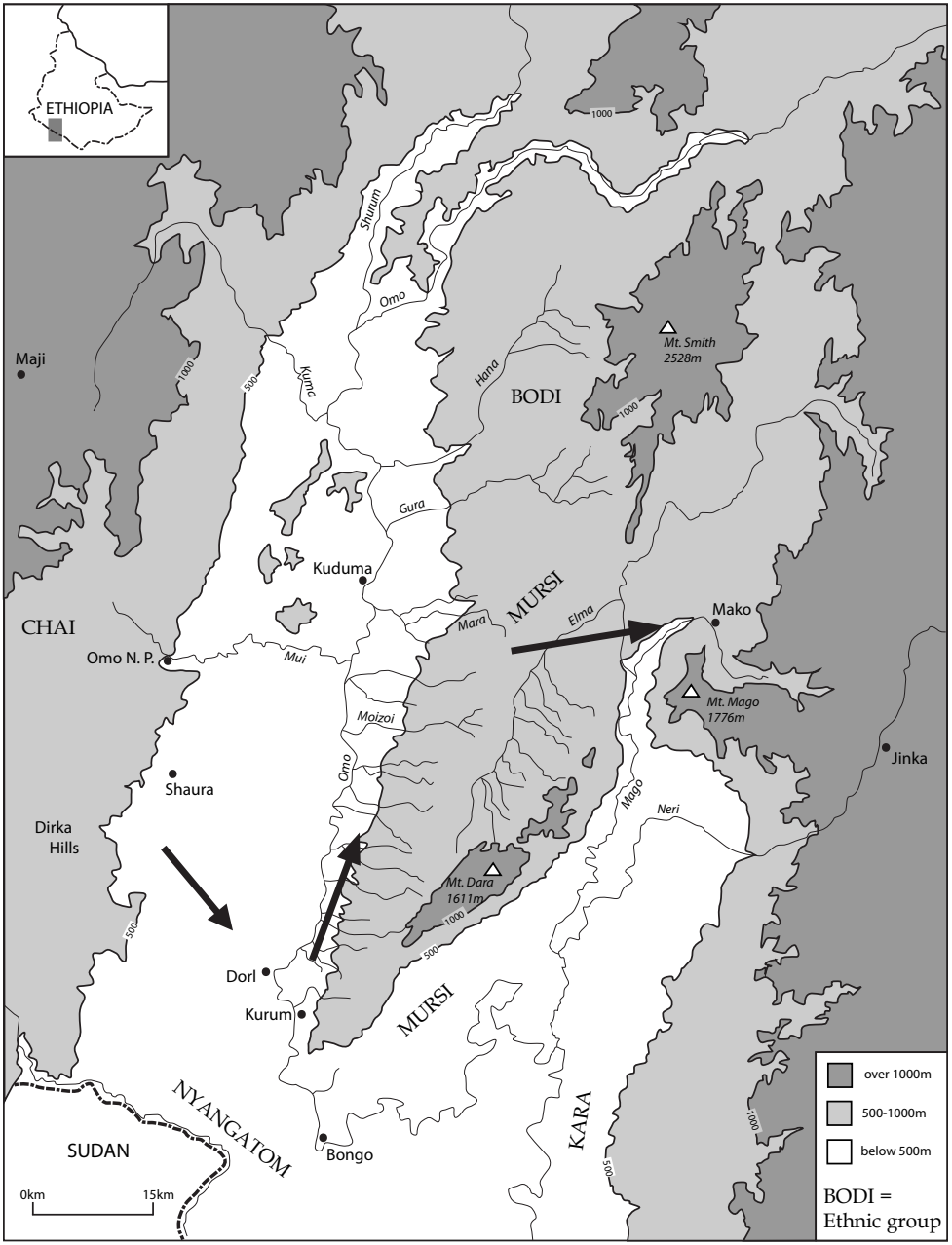
The handing on of historical information in a primarily oral culture, especially information about the origin of a group, differs greatly from the factual history which is sought after by literate historians. One way in which this difference shows itself is in the frequent occurrence of highly standardised and formulaic episodes in the oral traditions of different and sometimes widely separated groups. These episodes, called 'clichés' by students of oral tradition, enable complex information and ideas to be 'packaged' into a form that is simple to express and easy to remember. By definition, therefore, they are unlikely to be a reliable guide to the details of what actually happened in any one case.

The people described in the above story, for example, are said to have discovered the Omo because they were led to it by two of their own stock animals. This cannot be empirically true, since the Omo is clearly visible from the Dirka hills, where they were living at the time, and only 20 km east of Shaura, where they were watering their herds. The Omo, therefore, must have already been part of their known world, which is the very reason they could contemplate making the decision to move there. What then, if anything, does the story of the two bulls tell us about the historical reality it purports to describe?

The Mursi see themselves as a people who are, and always have been, 'looking for a cool place' (*kalamo bha lalini*). For pastoralists, this must imply, first and foremost, a place that satisfies the needs of cattle for water and grazing. The story of the bulls going off to drink at the Omo (which is found also, incidentally, in the origin tradition of the nearby Kara) may therefore be telling us that it was the needs of their cattle for

A public debate (*mezze*) in progress at Kuduma, on the right bank of the Omo, with ripening sorghum in the background. Before the Gibe III dam ended the annual flood in 2016, Kuduma was one of the most important sites used by Mursi and Kwegu for 'flood-retreat' or 'recession' agriculture (credit: D. Turton)

water and grazing that led the first Mursi to colonise the east bank of the Omo. Indeed, it is likely that the journey described above was prompted by a prolonged period of drought in the Omo lowlands, which would have made the relatively well-watered plains east of the Omo seem like an attractive prospect to a cattle-herding people. For here was a 'cool place' that combined a perennial source of water with well drained savannah grassland, rising gradually to the Omo-Mago watershed. Similar ecological imperatives have no doubt driven the migratory movements of pastoralists in East Africa for hundreds, indeed thousands, of years, which would explain why other traditions of origin in the region employ the same cliché.



The direction of Mursi migrations over the past 200 years (credit T. Clack)

But a tradition of origin is more than just a story about the past. Its purpose is not so much to explain how a group came to be, as to show that it was *meant* to be. The story must therefore invest with historical inevitability a purely contingent series of events which could have had an entirely different outcome. To do this it must show that the group owed its existence to agents and events which were beyond the reach of everyday human understanding – that were, to use a Mursi word, *berari.* One way in which this is achieved in the above story is by attributing the discovery of what was to become Mursiland to the actions of two non-human agents. Another is through the use of one of the most widespread clichés to be found in African traditions of origin – the magical crossing of a river. The crossing of the Omo is presented here as an inherently dangerous undertaking, requiring various preparatory measures of ritual protection, and accomplished by means of a miraculous parting of the waters which showed, in Lugulointheno's words, that 'the Mursi are powerful!' (*Mun a berari*). To find their 'promised land', then, the Mursi had depended on the inscrutable behaviour of the two bulls and on their own supernatural power.

By the middle of the last century they were successfully cultivating along the Omo as far north as Kuduma and herding their cattle in the wooded grass plains to the east. In the early 1970s, however, they experienced a drought and food shortage so severe that people died of starvation for the first time in living memory. The last three years of the same decade was also a period of poor rainfall and continuing hunger. This prompted a small group of families (probably no more than fifty) to move further east, to higher ground which had last been occupied, about seventy years earlier, by the Bodi. This was another short journey, of around 25 km as the crow flies, which took the migrants to the banks of another perennial river, the Mago (*Mako*). This area promised better rainfall, improved conditions for cultivation and better access to highland markets. Its disadvantages included the possibility of conflict with the neighbouring highland agriculturalists, the Aari, and a relatively high-level of tsetse infestation in the Mago Valley, which brought with it an increased threat to cattle from trypanosomiasis.

But over the following twenty years the original migrants were joined by a steady drift of new arrivals, and the 'People of Mako' (*zu a Makwe*) now form one of the largest constituent local divisions (*bhuranyoga*) of the Mursi. Having opted for a more sedentary lifestyle within the orbit of the highland market economy, they are seen by many Mursi today as on the way to becoming highland agriculturalists (*sunya*). But, so far from seeing themselves as falling away from traditional Mursi values, those who initiated the move saw themselves as 'more Mursi' than those who had stayed behind, since they were acting in the pioneering spirit of the 'founding fathers' who had first colonised the east bank of the Omo.

It is safe to assume that the Mago migration bore many of the hallmarks of the journey described above by Lugulointheno. With the help of this extrapolation we can imagine a general process in which small groups of pioneers, driven largely by environmental pressure, broke away from their parent groups and moved relatively short distances to occupy new territory. When a move was successful (and, of course, we only

know of the successes), the pioneers were joined by a gradual drift of new migrants and eventually a new group was made, with its own identity, livelihood system and even language. And so the process continued.

The result was a chain of groups, stretching over a long distance in space and time, in which the group at the end of the chain, at any one time, saw itself as having made a single epic migration and therefore as sharing a residual identity with all the other groups in the chain. In this sense, the journey that made the People of Mako began long before the journey that made the Mursi.

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9. Colour, Metaphor and Persons

Jean-Baptiste Eczet

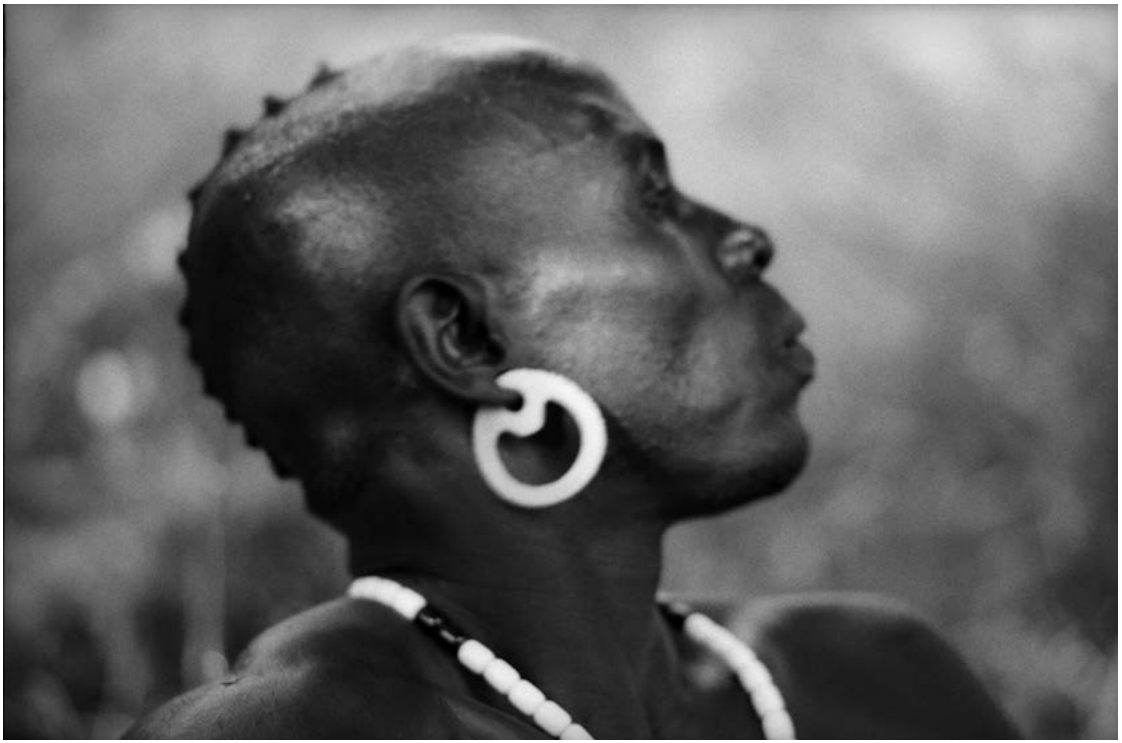
In this contribution the rich tapestry of Mursi language and culture is explored through conventions of naming and the interplay between cattle, places, colours and persons. What's in a name?

The boy was born along a pathway and his mother called him Bargoro ('Place of Path'). Soon after that, his father's friend gave him his own name, Olegidangi ('Brownish Bull'). This man also gave a brownish calf to the boy, which made him happy. He took great care of his bull, watching his behaviour and curing him when he was sick. As the bull grew older, the boy sometimes covered him with dung and then put some of it on his own face. By doing this, he inserted himself into an organic cycle: the bull creates dung and is then covered by it, like a never-ending repetition. Olegidangi put himself into this cycle and, being so close to his bull, he could identify with him. Moreover, people called him Brownish Bull while he was taking care of a brownish bull. There was no doubt that brownish cattle were like him, or that he was like brownish cattle.

Going to the pastures (credit: J-B. Eczet)

Children play at the Mara River (credit: J-B. Eczet)

Later, people gave the boy other names: his best friends called him Oledorr ('Muddy Bull'), his cousin called him Girlonngoro ('Muddy Path Smashed Elephants') and his father called him Kanga ('Baboon'). All his names were declensions of the brownish colour. Every person the boy met could decide to name him differently. By uttering a certain name, they would tell him, 'this is how I see you'. Day after day, year after year, the names accumulated. It was not only brownish cattle that were identical to the boy, but also all of the brownish elements that belonged to the landscape. The boy *was* brownish. This was claimed repeatedly and publicly in all his names. Brownish became an essential part of him and new names always referred to this colour. There is no limit to creating new names, only the ability of people to master poetical expressions. An old man, for example, decided one day to call him Mueytul. In Bodi language, the northern neighbour of the Mursi, this means 'look behind' (*goyn wuru*, in Mursi). This name refers to the well-known attitude of a scared baboon that, while escaping from a danger, stops, stands up high on his forelegs and... looks back. This name at once references the brownish colour of the baboon but also the name given to him by his father.



A man wearing daily ornamentation (credit J-B. Eczet)

For the boy, who becomes a man, to be called by an ever-growing constellation of names is to be described by others and to be passive in the definition of what he is. It is difficult for him to catch his identity, to *know* who he really is, because each relationship uses a specific name and identity. Is he the cousin called 'Muddy Bull' or is he the young man called 'Look Behind'? Is he the accumulation of all these different identities which each refers to just one unique relationship? There is someone in the community who can help. A *nani*, 'someone who knows', can assist him to be fully himself. It is time for him to assert his identity. The man tells the nani his story, including his names, his best friend's names, and the place where he comes from. The nani then composes a poem, like a synthesis of all of his connections in the world, the people he likes and the elements of his colour. Because no single name could fully describe him, because a name is only a support of a particular relationship, the poem has to give a range of facts that makes all the people think as one: that is him. For the man, to be someone is to be included in a network of people and to be part of the elements of the world which relate to the same colour.

A young woman making rhythms with her bracelets during a dance (credit: J-B. Eczet)

The girl was also very young when she received her name and her colour. She had been given her name by Bologushiro ('Spotted Hyena'). She was first called Nachare ('Leopard') and her colour was 'black spots'. Other people named her Tumu Dayno ('Evening Sky') because the stars make the sky spotted. A good friend decided to name her differently. For a few months, they went to the missionary school together and her friend realised that a written paper book was like a spotted surface: the letters were black spots on the sheet. So, she named her Warkate ('Paper Note'). Throughout her life, 'black spots' were seen in fresh situations and new names were invented and came to stand for specific relations of time and place. In a sense, the woman was spread out in the black spotted world.

One day the man and the woman met at a ceremony. Another day, they met because they wanted to, and later they decided to marry. The man kept his colours unchanged while the woman had to adopt new ones. She will always remember her former names. She will always remember that the stars and the leopard are

A family moment (credit: J-B. Eczet)

like her. But now, her brother-in-law gives her a new colour, his own, *chage*, which, in Mursi, simultaneously refers to grey, blue and green. Nowadays, the people name her using grey, blue and green elements of the environment: the mist, the *logy* (a blue bird), the fresh and green tobacco leaves or even the *kinoe*, the wild leaves that the Mursi collect and then cook in a clay pot, and so on. And she sings a poem to herself. She links all the elements that belong to her many names, all the face-to-face relationships that are part of her. In order to express her '*chage*nes':

I beckon to the gleaming water, the grey cow/ Which brings the mist from every direction
I draw with my hands on the smoky coat/ Of Gowiny's girls
Its own blue body frightens the blue bird/ The spear eats the tobacco body
The body with the tobacco coat, my man's brother/ Defies the red fire
Being a girl from daya/ I bother Karamsame, Chawuhi

In Loko one speaks about it softly/ And in Chermani one speaks about it slowly
And from the land called Mena/ With the grey cows of my father
I sing myself and the grey cows/ Bring the mist from every direction
Logy! Logy! Logy ! In the pot!

No name is unique, nor colour. But the network of people, of colours and of cattle surrounding a person through his or her life *is* unique. That is what a poem makes: the description of a unique person, not by focusing on him or her, but on the world around them.

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10. Clay, Cosmology and Healing

Kate Fayers-Kerr

The Mursi long ago realised that the more flamboyant and 'non-traditional' they painted their bodies, the more attention and more money they could collect from the influx of the many tourists with their cameras. But why and how do the Mursi paint, when they paint for themselves?

Clay and soil is integral to the ways in which Mursi comprehend and engage with the world around them. Clays of various colours and from various sources are used in daily activities, such as body decoration. They may also be employed for use in secret ceremonies held in the bush and away from the community, as would occur for the anointment of sacred cattle with red ochre. Other events that involve the use of clays take place at particular times in the annual cycle. The return to particular cultivation sites during the rainy season and after the Omo River floods is marked by the ceremonial use of clays that involve re-enacting historical events in Mursi origins, richly documented by skilled orators, and in blessing the crops for the return of a full harvest.

From a very young age, children are encouraged to cover themselves with mud, soot and cattle dung. Boys, since they spend mid-day watching the cattle, are taught to cover themselves with moist earth to shield their bodies from the dehydrating heat of the sun. This continues into adulthood where men continue to paint themselves, primarily with moist earth and dung, to protect against the sun and to reduce sweating. Dung is also used in a ritual context. For example, boys are taught to anoint themselves with dung

A child near Dirikoro after covering his face and chest with ash (credit: T. Clack)

Children 'dressed up' with facial and bodily decorations (credit: T. Clack)

as a means to protect the fertility of the herd. It is not uncommon to come across a group of boys 'dressing-up' in earths and clays, much as people in other cultures may dress-play in the clothes of their parents.

Some types of clay are reserved for use by certain age-sets. Such restrictions may land other groups into trouble, as would be the case were members of the warrior age-set to be found using *kurton*, a sandy red clay. But as the men get older, they generally decrease their engagement with body decoration, and are usually anointed with clay only at community ceremonies. Other materials may be used for particular occasions. Soot and mud, for example, are anointed on the forehead of a relative when they visit after a long journey or extended period of absence. It marks a sign of love and relatedness and protects those anointed against

Looking handsome; ready to visit his girlfriend (credit: K. Fayers-Kerr)

dangerous ancestral spirits who may have followed them on their journey. Spirits of this nature can both protect and harm living people and are therefore a serious concern for the Mursi. The intentions of spirits may be encountered through visions experienced in dreams, and through this the possibility of illness may also be predicted and protected against by the use of clays. Across the different clans that make up the collective Mursi, a variety of styles of painted protection may be observed, some of which may also involve the cursing of others, simply through the discrete application of small amounts of paint onto another's forehead.

Body decoration also forms an important part of Mursi courtship, incurring quite elaborate and visually pleasing design compared with the plainer body painting that otherwise dominates this Mursi tradition of bodily adornment. To court a new or potential female partner, young men travel from their cattle camp to the village, usually after a visit to a water-hole to wash, and arrive 'dressed' in striking and often matching 'suits' of clay. This may comprise head-to-toe yellow, pink or grey clays and earth. During a ceremony for a newlywed girl as she leaves her parents' homestead, her body, and those of her male relatives and best friends, is anointed with white clay, before she receives a trousseau to take with her to her new home. On the birth of a first child a female-centred celebration called *jhoné chibin* will see the use of red and white clays. These events involve much festivity, including elder women whipping reproductively active men and women for not having enough children; ritualised whipping is a common theme in the lower Omo valley, most famously among the Hamar.

Most of the Mursi's neighbouring groups, such as the Hamar, look upon the Mursi's styles of body painting as haphazard and scruffy. A popular style to recently emerge in Mursi decoration is called *nga luci*, which is made with clay hand prints coloured white, yellow or pink all over the body. A quicker alternative to whole-body painting, is to simply paint a red circle or other coloured lines around the mouth or face. But there is more to the substance than to the style. For the Mursi it is the act of being anointed and the clay itself that is potent, and not the stylistic product. Such application may also hold medicinal properties. The Mursi are not so interested in making a beautiful pattern on their body as they are in rituals that have direct bearing

on their health. In this they seem to differ greatly from the Hamar, but the 'popular' representation of Mursi body decoration – in photographic collections and journalistic portrayals – rarely captures this concept.

Father anointing his daughter and the rest of the community, since he had dreamt of an epidemic of measles reaching his village, and threatening people's lives (credit: K. Fayers-Kerr)

Three cousins have been anointed, along with the rest of their family, because there is an illness in the family and a cow has been killed to provide soup for the invalid (credit: K. Fayers-Kerr)

All Mursi families use white clays as a means to treat sick relatives, usually accompanied by the sacrifice of an ox from which to make a medicinal soup. Group healing rituals – ceremonies in which the whole community may be involved – utilise a sequence of black and then white clay that is rubbed between the palms of someone who is ritually potent, such as a member from one of the three priestly clans, who then drags their hands down and across the sick person's face, chest and arms. Mimicking this action, children are taught how to conduct their own quasi ceremony. By witnessing these moments of child-play, it becomes clear that in adult's healing ceremonies clays are used like pharmaceutical vaccinations. The clay and the act of its anointment onto the body is regarded as potent and medicinal. The design itself is, by comparison, of secondary importance and facility.

The potent black earth from Dirikoro is often used to anoint warriors before combat (credit: T. Clack)

Then there are the mysterious pink and green clays of the *ngerrêa*, or healing women of Mursi. These are the colours of the rainbow, with which the healing women are strongly associated. They are also colours associated with water, from which many diseases originate. Once again, the *ngerrêa* apply these clays not to create a design, but as a medicinal treatment in which they are rubbed in a haphazard fashion on the chest, back, face and perhaps the legs of someone requiring treatment.

For the Mursi, the origin or source of the clays is important. There are several clay pits that different clans inherit. Each pit may produce a particular clay associated with different types or degree of potency. The clarity of their colour is important, and the ownership of certain pits comes with notable levels of status. The Komorte and Juhai clans, and to a lesser extent the Kaigisi, have historic claims to some very significant clay pits.

Mursi beg for and borrow clays from their neighbours and relatives and may be very pleased to receive clay from a site far from their home, for this may add new potency to the existing repertoire.

Displays of wild and wonderful head-dresses and flamboyantly decorated bodies and lip-plates are attractions familiar to tourists, and have become daily aspects to the world of some Mursi on the edges of the National Parks. Indeed, these have become successful mechanisms employed to help tourists part with their money. But it is the simpler, more understated applications of clays, that are more traditional 'authentic' expressions of Mursi culture, medicine and belief.

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11. Nomadic Traditions of Cattle Beautification: The Mursi Example

Timothy Insoll and Timothy Clack

To outsiders, striking modifications of cattle bodies can make them appear like fantasy creatures. However, these decorative practices are highly meaningful, require considerable skill, and serve to relate persons and cattle. But why and how do these practices of beautification take place?

Cattle are of central social and ritual significance to pastoralist and agro-pastoralist societies in many parts of East Africa. Particularly in South Sudan, southwest Ethiopia, northern Kenya and northern Uganda, the cultural and social importance of cattle is underscored by their colouring, patterning and bodily modification.

People and landscape are inextricably linked to cattle. For the Mursi, places will often be defined and described in terms of cattle imagery. For example, Arichukgirong, the prominent hill spur in an otherwise flat landscape near Dirikoro, translates to 'snout of the bull', and Biogolokare, a section of the Omo River, means 'take out the eyes of cattle'. Like the Hamar further south in the Omo River area (see chapter 19), an individual will have an 'ox-name' – the name of his 'favourite ox' – that at once reflects the relationship between person and cattle and denotes distinctive characteristics, including coat colour, horn shape, body shape and behaviour.

Modification of a favourite ox can take the form of breeding for coat colour, castration, adornment with secondary ornaments such as bells around the neck, hot-iron pattern branding, horn shaping and ear cutting. These practices of beautification are conducted to bestow an individual animal with extra special qualities. Modification is enhancement, and the receiving ox becomes the exemplar of its kind. At the same time, its specialness permits it to leave the sphere of domestic animals and enter the realm of persons.

The process of pattern branding, which first involves the selection of a castrated ox, often white or pink in colour, is carried out over multiple sessions, and often over many weeks, by a skilled adult man using a heated *baera*, a chisel-like iron instrument. Whilst two men restrain the animal, the red-hot *baera* is moved in a continuous linear motion across the skin. Three types of patterning are routinely applied: the *missirou* (five concentric curved lines encircling the tail and anus) and two variants of the *mirren* (three concentric circles and a double 'U' form). Branded areas are ritually medicated with fresh cow dung (*chulloi*), and chyme (*wau-wu*) from a slaughtered cow. Chyme is a mixture of gastric juices and undigested food that flows from the stomach to the intestines and is used widely in Africa in cleansing rituals.

Symbolic references to ox branding permeate Mursi material culture. The double 'U' *mirren* pattern is often found on Kalashnikov AK-47 rifles, for example, and the concentric *mirren* circle is often featured in people's bodily scarification, hair decoration and on stone markers across the landscape.

Ox with newly branded *missirou* decoration (credit: T. Insoll)

Cow dung is used to medicate after branding and also as a sun block (credit: T. Clack)

There are at least three variants of modified horn shapes: *dogomme* (forward-shaped) and two variants of *chipto* (inward-shaped). The process involves a skilled adult man striking the base of the horn of a restrained ox using a large ground sandstone hammer (*Be'bhey Kara Nun*). Once loosened, the horns are cut and bound firmly with twine to encourage horn growth in the desired shape.

Recent research has demonstrated that practices of cattle modification may be relevant for the interpretation of cattle imagery in rock paintings and engravings in the Horn of Africa and possibly even further afield,

Warrior shows off his rifle with *mirren* patterning (top); torsos of two warriors scarred with *mirren* decoration (centre left and bottom right); *mirren* markings inscribed on a plastic container (credit: T. Clack)

From left to right: Branded ox with multiple concentric circle (*mirren*) decorations; and ox wearing secondary ornament (*nilla*) with modified horns in the dogomme style (credit: T. Clack)

where bovine representation is commonplace. Such archaeological evidence is likely to indicate that many forms of cattle beautification seen today find their origins in much more ancient practices.

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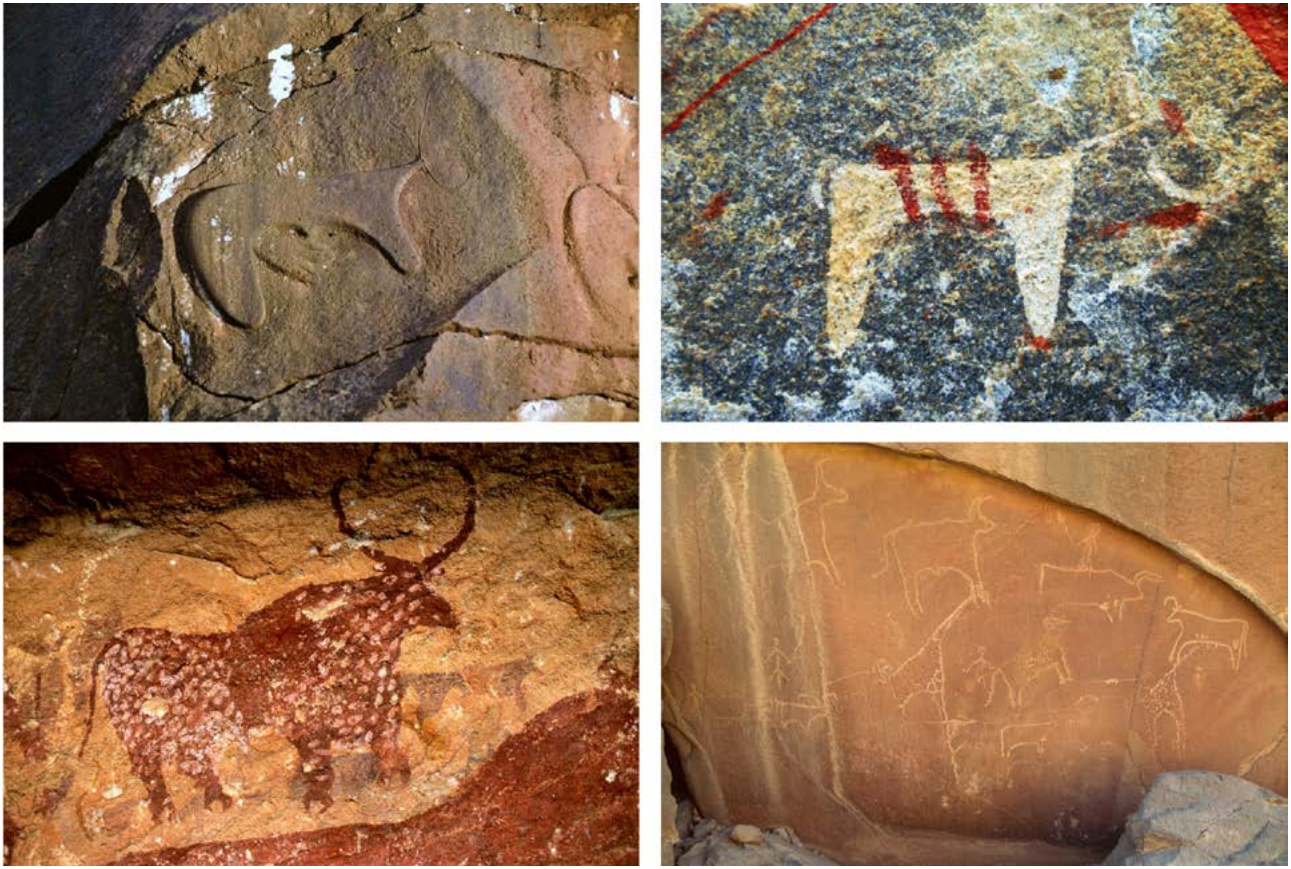

From left to right and top to bottom: etching of a cow, Sidamo, Ethiopia (note the forward-facing horns); bovid with stripes on flanks, Las Geel, Somaliland; red bovid with white spots, Tassili du Kozen, Chad; and cattle with deformed horns, Tibetsi Mountains, Chad (credit: M. Dioli)

12. Material Culture

Juan Salazar Bonet

Lip plates and fighting sticks are often taken to be representative of Mursi culture by mass media, documentaries, museums, photojournalism and touristic brochures. Also, the Mursi define themselves as the people who wear and carry these items. This, of course, is not the whole story. What other kinds of matter, materials and materiality define Mursi engagement with the world?

The Mursi, like other agriculturalist and mobile cattle herder groups in the Lower Omo Valley, have a diverse material culture. Often designed to be portable, most of their objects are elaborated with locally sourced perishable and replaceable materials such as wood, vegetable fibres, bark, seeds, clay, animal skin and leather. Other objects - iron tools, cloths and beads – have been historically acquired through trade with people living in the adjacent highlands. All these objects, regardless of their origin, play important roles in Mursi identity, as much as their language, beliefs or political institutions, and may define who and how a person belongs to the community.

Mobile settlements (*ôrri a bio*) located across the central plain, as well as recurrent villages (*ôrri a libain*) along the Omo's river banks, create an inhabited landscape. The settlements, and particularly the thatched dome-shaped houses inside of them, materialize Mursi marriages, since only married couples may build and inhabit them. The character of these settlements therefore sends a particular message to the rest of the community. Settlement interiors are the space of food processing and child development. A daily activity

Ôrri a bio in Maganto area (credit: J. Bonet)

for a Mursi woman is to grind the harvested sorghum grain against flat stone querns (*golu*), cooking the processed sorghum flour in clay-fired pots (*dôle* and *ju*) upon stone hearths outside of house doorways, and serving the resulting porridge to her family in a woven grass basket (*garchu*), to be eaten with an accompaniment of fresh milk from a dried calabash or gourd (*gussi*).

Mursi stool from the Manchester Museum collection (credit: J. Bonet)

A range of items adorn the house interiors, which are furnished with men's stools (*alli*), cowhide-sleeping mats (*hadha*), tubular-shaped wood containers (*hôloi*) and hide bags for grain (*kama*). Amongst the traditional clothing, stored and maintained, a woman may proudly own a dress (*sai*), capes (*sai-a bo*), skirts (*sira* and *kêlê*) and belts (*niarabay*), all made of tanned cow and antelope hides. Men use sandals (*chaha*) made from buffalo leather and wear cotton wraps around their waist, imported from Kenya over the past few decades as a cheap alternative to traditional bark clothes (*dhobi*). Whilst men might also wear shorts with recognisable sports logos, women too increasingly choose to adorn Western-made bras and, at times, cotton t-shirts. Both men and women wear metal earrings or circular clay plugs that stretch the earlobe. Bodies are adorned with beaded bracelets (e.g. *siggi, ula*), wrist and ankle bands made of iron, brass and other metals, as well as colourful ornaments crafted from plastic. Only a few decades ago, iron-tipped spears (*ber*), leather shields (*gasha*), and carved stone fighting bracelets (*giye gobe*) were also kept inside the household. The rifle (*turê*) has been a common feature of masculine identity across the Omo valley, replacing much of the traditional fighting equipment, though nowadays the Chinese variants of the AK-47 Kalashnikov are dominant.

Like many other East African pastoralist groups, there is a clear gender division in quotidian activities in Mursi communities. Women maintain garden plots cultivated with sorghum and maize; men herd cattle to graze and water. This division is materially informed, since both the activities of horticulture and pastoralism have a well-established set of associated objects. Iron tools such as hoes (*gaisa*), machetes (*bangka*) and billhooks (*wolu*) are used to clear the fields of harsh acacia bush, to plant cereal grain and harvest the crop. Wooden containers (*bagai*) and horn recipients (*kere*) are used to receive cow milk. And held with various types of ropes

Pottery-making in the Makki Valley (credit: J. Bonet)

(*mosai*), a small wooden bow with arrow (*lawun*) pierces the jugular vein of mature cattle to drain and consume iron-rich and nutritious blood.

Cattle are full social actors with a full sphere of their own material relationships. The most prized oxen are decorated with valuable iron bells (*kôdhô*), and a combination of iron rings and ivory tusks are attached to braided leather bands (*nyala*) worn around the head. The natural shape of cows' horns is also modified by using ground stone axes (see chapter 11) to obtain a range of aesthetic forms. All of these material elements combine to present a striking individuality for each animal. This is further and most elaborately enhanced by decorating the animals' skin either by cutting the ears using metal blades or by applying colourful ochres and clays to their bodies in all manner of designs.

Across all age groups, a range of skills are practiced to effectively use objects fashioned from local materials for gathering, hunting and fishing. Leather slings (*loshan*) are used to hurl stones to deter pests from the precious harvest. Manufacture of the woven grass baskets (*garchu*), lightly weighted for the collection of fruits, and compact so they may also carry water, can take weeks to complete, but years to learn. Various-sized hooks (*korrmi*) and harpoons (*rongode*), delicately carved out of wood and bone but also metal versions bought from highland traders, are essential for catching fish in the Omo River and its tributaries. And bark-crafted flutes (*moru*) are sung to call the 'honey-guide' bird and so locate bee colonies and hives – their honey then collected in hollowed wood containers.

Most of the Mursi rites and ceremonies have specific objects associated with the reproduction of the social life cycle. Young men, usually unmarried warriors, participate in violent ritualised duels (*thagine*) using

carved wooden fighting poles (*donga*) (see chapter 14). The duels, their commencement being announced by blowing antelope horn trumpets (*ture-a-rôngôdi*), include panoply of special protectors for hands (*orrgômay*), elbows (*tadaya*) and knees (*gara*) originally made from woven vegetal fibres, but nowadays a rudimentary arrangement of twisted or wrapped cotton cloth. With their bodies smeared with colourful clays, the fighters wear a resplendent combination of painted cowhide skirts (*kahi*), iron-cast cowbells, turtle-shell rattles and decorative leopard skins. Amongst the watching crowd are young unmarried girls, many wearing clay plates inserted into their lower lip (see chapter 13), seemingly disinterested in the cacophony, though fully aware of the successful combatants who march by, chest puffed and with donga aloft to hook an admirer's necklace.

Duelling is not the sole realm of men, for young girls also compete with one another in ritualised combat events, though distinguished from the men's *thagine* by their use of sharp-ended and often deadly iron bracelets (*ula*).

Many stages of Mursi collective life are celebrated in large communal events and marked by specific forms of material culture. The *nitha*

Ox decoration in Maganto settlement (credit: J. Bonet)

Material valuables presented before the departure of the bride (credit: J. Bonet)

ceremony is one example, during which young men are elevated to the status of adulthood with full social rights and responsibilities. During a *nitha*, a Mursi 'priest' (*komoru*) will decorate the new cohort of adult men with pieces of bark that imitate a lion's mane. In this way, the community bestows a new name upon the group and acknowledges their new social status in which, for example, they are allowed to use both a bow and arrow to bleed cattle and the ground-stone axe to shape their horns. This moment also frees the men to form marriage alliances, and so to start new independent settlements. In the context of a wedding ceremony (*gama*), before the bride may depart her family for her groom's compound, her extended family will provide her with items of value as a foundation for the new household.

Present day Mursi material culture is the consequence of multiple and dynamic variables such as the availability of resources, the relationships between people and their physical and social world, and the contact with foreign people and products, continuously incorporating the past in the present. Similar to other communities across the Lower Omo Valley, the Mursi are increasingly acquiring greater numbers of aluminium pots, automatic weapons, cotton clothing and plastics, including containers and adornments. Although it has never been static, the survival of non-industrial or 'traditional' material culture and the knowledge required for its manufacture and use are seemingly at odds with the currents of change currently experienced by communities across the region.

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13. Lip Plates

Shauna LaTosky

The ceramic lip plates worn most famously by the women of the Lower Omo Valley are so striking that they have come to represent both people and place to outsiders. In this contribution an ethnographer explores beneath the surface to describe the various meanings of this most extraordinary piece of material culture. Why plates?

The Mursi use *dhebi a tugon*, the lip-plate, or 'circular flange labret', to distinguish themselves from others, including those who wear different styles of plate, like the Suri. At the same time, the lip-plate is a way for the Mursi to identify with their cultural neighbours, especially the Chai and Tirma, but also the Baale. The Tirma, Chai and Baale form an ethnic unit called Suri (also known as Surma to outsiders). As Kirinomeri Tokô, a Mursi elder stated:

> The clay [lip-plate] is a tradition our ancestors passed on long, long ago. A woman would never serve her husband water, milk or porridge without wearing her lip-plate. If a girl did not wear her lip-plate people would say: 'Why do you misbehave?' If a girl did not pierce her lip she was called a Ngidi (Kwegu). The people called Chachi (Chai), Tirmaga (Tirma) and Baales (Baale) also pierce their lips; we are four.

When a Mursi girl reaches puberty, she will have her lip pierced and a small wooden stick inserted, giving her a new identity as a mature girl (*ngodinyaru*). Over a period of several months to a year, her lip is stretched by inserting bigger and bigger wooden and clay plugs, and, then, increasingly larger lip-plates made either

A wood plug (*kiyo*, left), pottery plug (*luruktai*, second from left) and pottery lip-plates (*dhebinya*) used to stretch a girl's bottom lip (credit: S. LaTosky)

of clay (*dhebi*) or wood (*kiyo*). Once her lip has healed, she is defined as being sexually mature. Thus, tied tightly to fertility and eligibility for marriage, the lip-plate signifies sexual maturity and beauty. This contradicts more popular claims that historically it was a way of making women less attractive to slave traders.

In Mursi, the size and type of Mursi lip-plates have not only to do with the personal tastes and priorities of specific individuals, but with the size of the lip itself. Although the ideal is to obtain the largest labret possible, some girls' lips will simply not withstand the long-period of stretching, and, for fear of it tearing, it is quite common for a girl today to either choose not to pierce and stretch her lip at all, or to only stretch it to fit a small clay lip-plate.

Ngonta Biochaga adorning herself with a ceramic lip-plate (credit: S. LaTosky)

There is some variation in the shape, style and design of lip-plates. The four main kinds of clay lip-plates are: red *(dhebi a goloinya)*, reddish brown *(dhebi a luluma),* black *(dhebi a kora)* and a natural or 'white' clay colour *(dhebi a hola).* The red lip-plates are made by placing them in hot coals and covering them with the sweet-smelling bark of the *gongwi* tree. The 'white' lip-plates are fired, but not rubbed as the black ones are with grass *(lanwi)* or burned with *lômmai,* a plant-based substance that when made into a white paste is used to heal wounds, including freshly pierced ears, lips, and cicatrisation (healed scar) marks.

Wooden lip-plates (*buruwi*), traditionally made only by men, are said to be the largest and most beautiful lip-plates worn by both unmarried girls and married women. In Mursi, wooden labrets (*buruwi*) are referred to

Lip-plates in a variety of colours, designs and forms (credit: S. LaTosky)

as 'white' (*holi*) because of the light colour of the wood. Although such lip-plates are seldom seen among the northern Mursi, girls in the south still frequently wear them. Many girls today refer to the wooden lip-plates as somewhat old-fashioned and no longer as popular as pottery lip-plates, which are often polished with milk, grass, brass bracelets and/or crushed pumpkin seeds, and decorated with different designs.

Lip-plates are more frequently worn by younger women, especially the unmarried and newly-wed, than by married women with children. They are generally worn on three main occasions: when serving men food; when milking cows, and during important ritual events, in particular weddings, ceremonial duelling competitions and dances. Unmarried girls, especially those with large lip-plates might wear them whenever they are in public (e.g. when fetching water or visiting friends).

New brides will live with their in-laws (or in some cases will remain with their mothers) during their first year of marriage or until the lip has fully healed before she shares a cowhide with her husband. The lip-plate serves to remind people of a woman's commitment to her culture, and, above all, to her husband. If the husband dies, the lip-plate is thrown away and is never worn again. Even if a woman is taken in by one of her deceased husband's brothers, it is very unlikely that she will wear a lip-plate unless she is very young.

A woman will typically wear her lip-plate during the first few years of marriage, but, as the years go on, she will insert her lip-plate less and less frequently when serving her husband and his guests food or attending harvest celebrations. Today, the ritual observance of piercing and stretching girls' bottom lips and the subsequent practice of wearing the lip-plate are in decline. As Bikalumi Sabakoro, a Mursi woman, explains:

> Now everything is changing. Only in Kurum do some still follow the old tradition [of wearing the lip-plate until the husband dies]. Before my daughter had a large lip-plate, but like my brother's wife they just stopped wearing them. So many things are changing. I will say to my daughter: 'Now, you smell bad [misbehave]! Why? It's bad that you go without your lip-plate. Why do you not listen? Don't you understand our traditions? You just make up your own story and follow your own ideas! And you want to call yourself a married woman? We wore ours [lip-plates] forever! You don't understand [the way of] the lip. I am a person who never stopped [wearing] the lip [plate]. I wore it forever (...) to serve my husband'.

As Mursi ideas about wearing lip-plates change so too do the sizes and specific aesthetic intentions of lip-plates. For instance, tourism has created a demand for lip-plates, thus changing the aesthetic look of them. In recent years, the Mursi have begun to talk about two broad categories of lip-plates: 'lip-plates for tourists' (*dhebinya turussinyawun*), alternatively referred to as 'lip-plates tourists buy' (*dhebinya katalcha turrussi*'), and 'real Mursi lip-plates' (*dhebinya Munuin*) worn by girls and women. Lip-plates that are made for tourists are generally larger and thinner and painted with polka-dot designs using white clay or etched

A Mursi woman wearing a large lip-plate (credit: A. Arzoz)

with half-moon shapes and lines after they have been fired. Alternatively, those that are worn by girls and married women are carefully fired and polished to bring out the red, black and brown colours of the clay. Some are carefully decorated with symmetrical half-moon shapes and lines. They are also made to fit the girl's stretched lip and therefore tend to be smaller and thicker than the labrets made for tourists.

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14. Identity Ceremony: the Duel

Tamás Régi

The Mursi are well known for their ceremonial duelling or 'stick fighting'. However, there is still much to understand of this remarkable spectacle. In this contribution some of the lesser known dimensions of duelling are described. What's in a duel?

Ceremonial duelling (*thagine*) is one of the most important annual events in the Mursi calendar. Duelling is seen as reinforcing the identities of the different Mursi territorial groups, as a chance for young males to prove themselves to their fathers, and as an opportunity for unmarried men to attract a female partner. Whatever the motivation for people's participation, the annual event is a distinct part of Mursi individual, group and political identity. Renowned for their fierceness, duels lie at the forefront of the Mursi's regional and international reputation. However, somewhat paradoxically, these ceremonies actually serve to structure society and settle personal or group disputes in a peaceful way.

A ceremonial duel in progress. Male elders ensure other fighters and spectators are kept at a distance (credit: T. Clack)

Putting on the head protection with the help of friends from the same locality and age grade (credit: T. Régi)

The ceremonial duelling event will only generally last for about three days, but it occupies people's thoughts and impacts their actions throughout the year. Preparing for the contest is central to most male teenagers' thought and often impinges on their behaviour and personal relationships. The inspiration for duelling is frequently moulded by social interactions, particularly those that involve pride and reputation.

There is no fixed date or time in the year for duelling to occur. In most cases it follows the wet-season harvest, when people are likely to have greater access to milk and sorghum, and the whole society, but in particular the male contestants, have access to a healthier diet than at other times in the year. The time and the place of the event is usually decided by the male elders and announced through informal communication routes many weeks before the ceremony. From this time, most unmarried men excitedly prepare for the contest and the teenagers (*terro*), in particular, may be seen practicing their defensive and offensive techniques in the cattle camps.

Well in advance to the event, contestants cut, shape and polish their duelling poles (*donga; dongen* [plr.]; see chapter 12). On the morning of the duel, most male contestants smear their bodies with a thin layer of mud clay or crushed stone-powder mixed with water. This helps duellists avoid painful skin ruptures caused by blows from the poles during the bouts, and the colour and source of the materials provides a source of personal strength and good fortune (see chapter 12). Grouped by territorial sections and age-grade membership,

contestants arrive at the appointed scene and start their preparation for the duels. These warriors wear only limited protective wrappings (*tumoga*) made from cotton cloth, leather and bark (see Salazar Bonet, this volume). The contestants also wear purely ceremonial objects: leopard skins, handed down through the previous generations; strips of hide and cattle belts. Age-group mates help to prepare combatants. No contestant is permitted to fight against another member of his own territorial section, and opponents must belong to the same age group.

Before the duel begins, a referee (*kwethana*) stands between the two fighters. Spectators, supporters, men and women both young and old encircle the duelling ground. Organisers try, with some difficulty, to maintain order and distance between the crowd and the duellists. There are rules of engagement that must be followed. The contestants cannot point their poles at each other and must land a blow to the opponent's body with the donga shaft. The right hand must stay at the bottom of the pole while the left hand slides up and down on the *donga* depending on whether they are performing a defensive or an attacking move.

Contestants in protective gear (*tumoga*) await their bout at a *thagine* event in 2011 (credit: T. Clack)

Photograph of a bout in 1971. The fighter on the left wears a basket helmet (credit: D. Turton)

The fundamental aim of each combatant is to injure their opponent, and preferably drawing blood. With rapid blows, a fight can last only a minute if a fighter falls or gives up the battle. Then, team mates shelter their defeated friend or, if victorious, raise him up on their shoulders. Usually there are a number of fighting grounds where bouts run parallel with each other for days. With only limited numbers of protective kits for each team, the fighters' share their outfits. While the bouts are in progress, age-grade mates chant and dance around the duel grounds in their territorial sections. The air cries full of noise, with whistles and the smacking sound of the wooden poles and poles on skin and bone, as well as loud cheers and, sometimes, the sound of gun shots.

The *donga* is not only an important event for the male contestants and their age grades as a whole, but for every member of society. People travel from distant places across Mursiland to see the contests and, even if they do not participate in the actual duels, it is a chance to meet with other Mursi, renew friendships and update on news. This yearly ceremonial event maintains social cohesion, individual and group identity and is one of the most important of Mursi cultural traditions.

The top of the poles, the shape of which is nowadays influenced by the neighbouring Suri (credit: T. Régi)

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15. Local Economics: Cattle and Crops

Demerew Danye and Anastasia Novichkhina

Making a living in Mursiland is challenging and sometimes perilous: the sun can be punishing, rain is unpredictable, and growing crops and livestock requires constant effort. Given all the difficulties, how do the Mursi make the most from their land? And what does the future hold for their traditional economy?

A raised granary in Mursi near Nortanmei (credit: T. Clack)

Through archaeology and the analysis of ancient pollen trapped in 'fossilised' hyrax faeces a picture of the economic development of communities that inhabit Mursiland has recently been revealed (see chapters 5 and 6). This suggests that at least by the mid-eighteenth century the cultivation of cereals was an established practice in conjunction with the rearing of cattle. The exact nature by which these early communities employed these systems is not clear, but illustrates the importance placed upon a balance of these resources, as well as their vulnerability to the valley's environmental extremes.

Today's Mursi communities are overwhelmingly pastoralist, which they express in the cultural value placed upon their cattle herds and their traditionally mobile lives. But Mursi are also heavily dependent upon cultivation, and the cycle of environmental conditions most optimal for lush grazing and successful harvests initiates the rhythmic movement of entire communities to different areas of the valley throughout the year.

Mursi depend on the integration of three subsistence activities: rain-fed cultivation, flood-retreat cultivation, and cattle and small stock herding. Each of these activities provides

Sorghum harvest on the riverbanks at Gorrente, Kara (credit: F. Girke)

structure to Mursi society, notably through traditional divisions of labour, particularly by age and gender. Young boys tend to the grazing of cattle and have responsibility for their protection from raiders and wild animals. Men oversee the appropriate pairing of animals for breeding. Crops are generally tended by women, who manage their processing from the harvest to the meal.

The main cereals are sorghum and maize, from which a porridge forms the staple diet; beans and cowpeas are also grown. There are two main harvests each year. One is carried out along the banks of the Omo and Mago Rivers, where the retreated floodwaters leave fine nutritious silts that are cultivated between October and January. Further inland, forest and scrub are cleared to form small fields before the arrival of the main rain season, usually during March and April. Knowledge of the suitability of soils for cultivation is one part of a broader frame of soil intelligibility that is a prominent feature of Mursi life (see chapter 10), and darker soils tend to be favoured. The reliability of cultivation varies from one season to the next, particularly owing to the unpredictability of the distribution, duration and intensity of rainfall. Long droughts may result in meagre returns. Added to this, the area available for flood-retreat cultivation is small, equating only to little pockets and strips along the river margins. Again, returns can at times be small.

A woman in Ulomholi cooking (credit: A. Arzoz)

With the constraints that may accompany cultivation, the resilience of the Mursi subsistence economy is largely a product of their relationship to cattle. For much of the year cattle are kept in the wooded scrub grassland that rises eastward towards the Dara range and the Omo-Mago watershed. Here, at the core of Mursiland, where cattle raiding by neighbouring groups is less likely, the valley of the perennial Elma River is particularly important as it is relatively free from disease-carrying tsetse fly, and water can usually be found, even in the middle of the dry season. Nonetheless, during the driest time of the year (December to February) cattle are herded further afield.

Although cattle may provide meat, they are valued animals integral to ordering the Mursi cultural world, as well as providing a means, by their quantity, to develop and cement individual status within the community. Reference to colour and its classification, for example, is made only through cattle-colour terms. In the context of a marriage, a transaction of 38 or more head of cattle by the family of the groom to the bride's father might be expected, these then to be distributed to extended relatives. Such redistribution strengthens

Mursi man sits in the shade with a meal of porridge (credit: T. Clack)

ties across the community. Killing of a cow may therefore only be reserved for a special occasion to enable communal feasting, or to promote good fortune in difficult times. Milk and blood drawn from live cattle are nonetheless important products for the Mursi diet, and act as a form of insurance against crop failure.

The Mursi economy is today under considerable stress, and the longevity of seasonal movement and the traditional agro-pastoral lifestyle is uncertain. The best land used by Mursi for flood-retreat cultivation – the banks of the Omo River – lie within the Omo and Mago National Parks, the latter of which also contains the best dry-season grazing land. Mursi presence within these parks is not always welcome. More recently, development of intensive mechanised agriculture along the banks of the Omo River by multinational corporations has grown out of the management by a series of hydroelectric dams of the watershed that charges the Omo River further to the north. Changes in the cyclical rhythms of the waters, along with restrictions to access of the river banks is a massive and real change, out of which the Mursi traditional economic pathway is unlikely to be sustained.

An ox is slaughtered with a single blow to its skull with a rock; the animal is butchered in the open quickly and on a bed of leaves. The meat is distributed according to social obligations (credit T. Clack)

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Part 4: Exceptional Diversity – Omo Cultures

Mursi women dance, sing and clap at a ceremony in Dirikoro in 2011 (credit: T. Clack)

16. Omo Autonomies: On Populations, Tribes, and Ethnicity

Felix Girke

What should we call social groups? The diversity of collective identities and populations in the Lower Omo Valley offers both challenge and opportunity to the anthropologist engaged in categorising and differentiating. When is a tribe not a tribe? Or are we dealing with populations or ethnicities? And what's the difference?

Anthropologists have long struggled over the notion of 'tribe' – texts with titles such as 'The illusion of tribe' or 'The problem of tribe' abound. What makes a tribe? What are its defining characteristics, what differentiates it from other social forms? In recent decades, the notion itself has fallen out of favour in scholarly circles and beyond. Regardless of how it might be analytically defined, 'tribe' has come to stand for a colonial, paternalistic, exoticising view of rural populations in Africa, and the term is used today mostly as a generalizing adjective that serves to differentiate the periphery from the centre (e.g. 'tribal areas') or as a downright denunciation of kinship-based nepotism ('tribalism'), a relic of a past that is to be overcome.

Other alternatives have come into use, most successfully the term 'ethnic group'. The Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth famously defined ethnic groups by their boundary-making efforts: cultural traits may be shared or not, people may come and go, but regardless of these dynamics, a social boundary is maintained between those within and those without. How these social boundaries are understood, and how they are maintained in each specific case, becomes the main task when studying the social organization of culture difference. But he was not too concerned with definition of what makes an 'ethnic group', or with demarcating it from other social forms.

What to do, then, about populations as we find them in the Lower Omo, that would have fit the earlier 'tribe' paradigm perfectly well? What do we call them? 'Populations', as I have done here, is certainly not wrong, but technical and unspecific. Consider the name of the administrative unit that contains the South Omo Zone: 'Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State' (SNNPRS). Are the Hamar, the Mursi, the Arbore and Dasanech, then, best considered 'nations', 'nationalities', or 'peoples'? It seems clear that these terms do the empirical reality a disservice (even while they lend a certain gravity to identities labelled as such) and cannot be claimed to be accurate or descriptive. Much rather, these terms appear like outcomes of a top-down effort to display emancipatory engagement – to call populations of 1,500 or even 5,000 or 30,000 people a 'nation' only makes sense in a legalistic terminology.

Unsurprisingly, we find few references to 'the Hamar nationality' today – but they exist, and they serve to emphasize that on some level, the category 'Hamar' is as real and important as any other recognized ethnonym in the country. The context of this designation is Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, a policy strongly

On the day of the final ritual that establishes the new Ologuita age-set in Kara, its members are herded back to the village by wand-wielding seniors (credit: F. Girke)

pursued from the 1990s until recently. More commonly used in reference to the populations of South Omo is in fact the expression 'ethnic groups'. Ethnic federalism basically assumes that populations are 'ethnic' when they are socially and culturally bounded – to wit, that cultural homogeneity and spatial organisation go together.

The 'ethnic group' also brings with it echoes of historical continuity, genealogy and kinship, of a particular language, and clear understandings of belonging. A definition that might be proposed could be that of a

Generational 'age sets' and clans bind groups into collective identities. These Mursi men from Dirkoro are united through their age grade, clan and politco-territory (credit: T. Clack)

population speaking its own language, practicing and perpetuating particular cultural traditions, while inhabiting a spatially bounded territory. Is that, however, what we find in South Omo?

David Turton, an anthropologist who has studied the Mursi for several decades settles on a markedly specific sociological term: 'politico-territorial', in that it consists of people who have shared interest within a shared territory and who conduct their affairs in relative independence. Turton also emphasized that they are also better considered a cluster of clans that united to occupy a certain region. Should disaster strike, the Mursi as a whole might disappear, but the clans would live on.

Elders of the Ngaric section of the Nyangatom, descendants of the Omo Murle (credit: F. Girke)

My research in Kara confirmed to me that Turton was onto something. For one, the Kara, are homogeneous only on the surface. How divided and differentiated can a population of barely 1,500 people even be? Stunningly so: the Kara understands themselves as divided into different kinds of people, with clearly marked boundaries – they have local understanding of ethnicity. According to their reckoning, 'the Kara' are made up of people belonging to five different categories: the Kara, the Bogudo, the Gomba, the Nyangatom, and the Moguji. This is not counting the individual immigrants that also belong to Kara, most notably a man from Bashada, a Turkana, and a Toposa. Again, many of these distinctions are not particularly visible – it took me a while to piece together who counted as what, and which consequences this had for everyday life.

Especially striking was that the majority population is also called Kara and is not marked by a separate term: the word for the entire population was the same that was used to discuss internal differences. I ended up calling them the 'true Kara'. These ethnic distinctions matter in ritual as well as mundane interaction, in kinship and marriage, in internal politics, and many other arenas. However, when people who self-identify as belonging to Kara interact with people who are clearly not Kara, the identification as 'Kara' quickly overrides the various ethnic subdivisions. It is assumed by partners in interaction that it mostly matters whether somebody is a Hamar or a Kara, but not what kind of Hamar or Kara. Many Kara also speak several languages perfectly well – in fact, one could say it is typical for being a Kara to speak Hamar and Nyangatom as well.

Four young Kara women harvest grass for the roof of a new house (credit: F. Girke)

One of the most senior Kara elders leads a ritual to cast out the rain in 2006 (credit: F. Girke)

So, calling the Kara an ethnic group obscures the dynamics that characterize this population: the constant negotiation and sometimes struggle between ethnic subsections about rights, access, and representation. What keeps all these people together as Kara is a political project: control of their territory, the river banks of the Omo that afforded highly productive and sustainable cultivation of sorghum and maize.

The Kara recognize other groups like themselves in what has been called the 'cultural neighbourhood' of South Omo: the afore-mentioned Hamar, the Banna, the Bashada, the Nyangatom, Dasanech, Mursi and

Discussions over a recently finished dug-out canoe (credit: F. Girke)

Arbore. These are the other politico-territorial units that matter most for the Kara's understanding of their world. All these others also occupy and cultivate territory as agriculturalists and pastoralists, claim cultural distinctiveness, and seek to maintain relative independence from one another. Other populations, like the Aari and the Maale to the North, are – for the Kara – already too involved in the Ethiopian state-project to be good examples of the kind of autonomous group that the Kara themselves seek to be.

To summarize: the Kara are internally ethnically heterogeneous, but seek to act in their external relations as a unified group; they do all that they can – including committing tit-for-tat violence against others, but also engaging in peaceful displays of distinctiveness – to maintain the understanding that there are 'the Kara' who live in a certain territory and are a force to be reckoned with. They see others like themselves, and others who once were like themselves but then got absorbed by the Ethiopian state or proved too weak to defend their relative independence and became absorbed by others – primarily, their own subsections of Bogudo and Gomba, who once (it is assumed) formed autonomous polities themselves.

Why do these distinctions matter? For one, using 'ethnic groups' for the autochthonous populations of South Omo is a serviceable shorthand; no more, no less. Arguably, though, this term comes with as much (if slightly different) baggage as 'tribes', and it tells us little about how these populations are organized and how they manage to stick together. Their politico-territorial projects are what make them who they are.

As a result, the Kara and all their neighbours are adept politicians who have much experience and wisdom to contribute to the further development of the region. In constant interaction, they have developed a complex regional system of exchange and communication that was resilient enough to survive largely unchanged throughout the twentieth century.

The fact that recent large-scale transformations such as the damming of the Omo River and the establishment of industrial irrigated farming undercut their subsistence production – the main means of maintaining their autonomy – is a drama that has played out in many other parts of the world before. But in the end, it falls to the Ethiopian State to safeguard the rights and the weal of its citizens who live in the Omo Valley, especially if their ways of life are in danger of being eroded, and their social integration – which is so much more complex than simply being united by 'ethnicity' – is threatened at every turn.

This is what I would declare to be a most significant result of the brief anthropological analysis above: to be serious about the Kara and their neighbours must entail leaving them a degree of autonomy in deciding about their own future and fate; to allow them to continue to pursue a politico-territorial project on at least partly their own terms.

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17. Linguistic Diversity

Shiferaw Assefa and Marcus Brittain

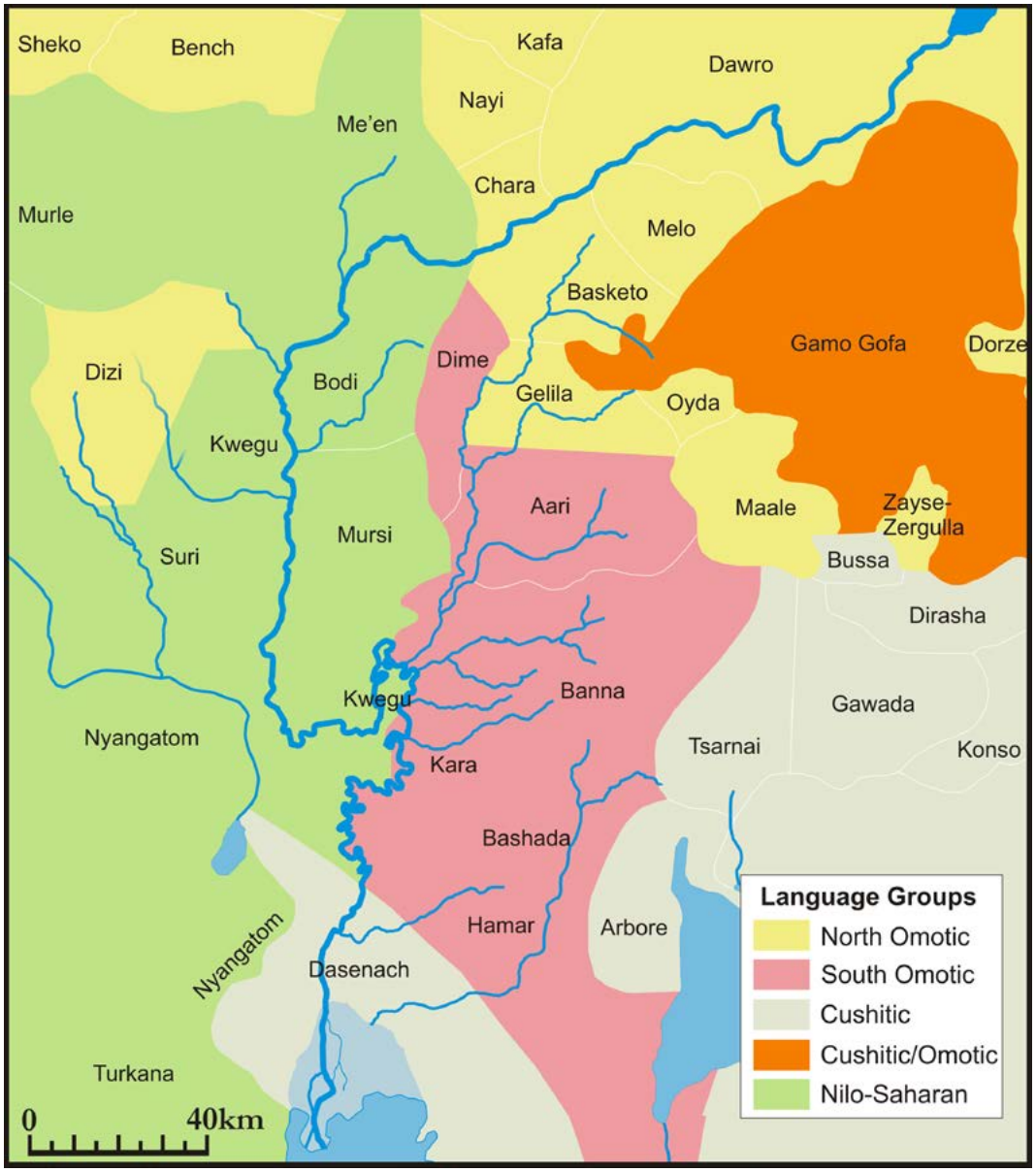
The linguistic diversity of the Lower Omo Valley is unparalleled. Nowhere else in the world do you encounter as many languages and language families in such a small area. Who speaks what and where?

The Lower Omo Valley is unique for its linguistic diversity. Studying the languages of this region provides insight to the cultural variety by which it is characterized, either marking distinctions between groups or the linguistic connections that bind them, as well as providing linguistic artefacts through which the historical development of the region may be traced. Language acts to bind social groups or to distance them, and different patterns of language use are integral to social behaviour and the ways by which human groups determine and reflect upon their respective identities.

The historical development of languages is often referred to in genetic terminology. Similar to the descent line of many organisms, a complex family tree of languages may be used to illustrate multiple linguistic branches from a common origin, thereby displaying the relationships between these. A 'mother' language may divide into 'daughter' languages – or proto-languages – which may further evolve into daughter languages of their own. Variations of dialect may also distinguish groups within a language family. Changes in linguistic character – words, sounds and syntax – may represent historical divergences that may potentially align with archaeological evidence and traditional oral histories.

The societies that inhabit the Lower Omo Valley include speakers of languages that stem from both the Omotic and Cushitic branches of the ancient Afroasiatic language family, along with very different languages that belong to the Surmic and Nilotic branches (together sometimes referred to as Eastern Sudanic) of the Nilo-Saharan family. Over several millennia, an immensely varied history of cross-cultural encounters has played out to result with these numerous language communities.

The Omotic languages in southern Ethiopia belong to two primary language branches: South Omotic and North Omotic. Groups belonging to the North Omotic branch include the Maale, Basketo and Chara. The South Omotic branch, which consists of the linguistic communities of the Aari, Dime, Hamar, and Kara, currently occupy the highlands immediately west of the Lower Omo and also, in the case of the Hamer and Kara, some lower-lying areas of the Omo Valley. The subsistence agriculture carried out by these communities is varied and highly dependent on local environmental conditions. Many of the Omotic languages are tonal, ranging from two to six phonemic tones that designate both lexical contrast and grammatical information, such as gender distinction or possession.



Distribution of language families in the lower Omo Valley and neighbouring areas (credit: S. Assefa and M. Brittain)

The Cushitic-speaking communities that are of particular interest in the long-term history of the far southern part of Ethiopia are the Dasanech, Arbore, and Tsamai. The Dasanech and Arbore constitute the Western Omo-Tana sub-group of the Omo-Tana branch of Lowland Eastern Cushitic, whereas the Tsamai are a member of the distinct Dullay branch of the Eastern Cushitic language family.

Spoken for several millennia in areas along the west of the lowermost Omo River, Surmic languages have a long history of contact with neighbouring Omotic languages. As with Nilotic languages, many of speakers of Surmic languages conduct a pastoral means of subsistence, the mobility of which may in part account for its rapid linguistic expansion across southern Ethiopia and South Sudan. The genetic classification of Surmic divides into a Northern and a Southern branch, the latter of which divides into a Southwestern and Southeastern branch. The Northern branch, which contains just the Majang language, lies outside of the Omo Valley. The two Southern branches encompass the remainder of the Surmic languages, including Bodi, Suri (an ethnonym that covers three languages: Baale, Tirmaga and Chai) and Mursi. There are many linguistic facets that distinguish between the languages. For example, the Southeastern branch of Surmic

Kara women scraping flesh out of a hide under a shelter in Korcho village in 2008 (credit: M. Bassi)

contains seven vowels; the Southwestern branch has a nine or ten-vowel system and an advanced harmonic form.

The Nilotic branch of the Nilo-Saharan family has three subgroups: Western and Eastern (both represented in Ethiopia) and Southern (located in Kenya and Tanzania). In the region of the Lower Omo Valley are two languages of the Eastern Nilotic branch: Turkana and Nyangatom. The latter of these, Nyangatom, spread into Ethiopia before colonial intervention, and is thought to represent the most recent expansion of Eastern Nilotic pastoral groups.

Nilotic and Surmic language families lie within an area of considerable, but defined, spread or expansion. However, the Lower Omo Valley is a zone distinct from this broader linguistic expansion by way of its genetic and typological diversity. Nevertheless, similarities across the Nilotic and Surmic languages of the region suggest that considerable contact has taken place between groups over a considerable stretch of time.

There is much about the history of human groups in the Lower Omo Valley that can be learnt through linguistic research, and indeed many questions still remain to be answered. The region's linguistic diversity points to a complex history of migration and inter-group connections, with the region itself acting as a crossroads of sorts through which contact was possible. Whilst fluctuations in environmental conditions may be one driving factor for the mobility of different linguistic groups, this does not fully explain the apparent magnetism of the Lower Omo Valley itself to populations of diverse linguistic heritages. The ways by which language too has helped shape local environments and identities over time is one of the many exciting questions currently open to debate.

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18. Sacrifice and Stone Platforms in Bodi

Lucie Buffavand and Timothy Clack

The Bodi are the northern neighbours of the Mursi who share a similar language and culture. The group have traditions involving the construction and ritual use of stone platforms comparable to those found by archaeologists in Mursiland.

Oral histories from many of the groups inhabiting the Lower Omo Valley concur that both the Mursi and the Bodi have moved gradually northwards over the last few hundred years. Indeed, centuries ago, when the Mursi first crossed the Omo River, they were entering land previously in the possession of Bodi ancestors. There are lengthy, detailed claims linking various Bodi clans to particular parts of today's Mursiland (see

Men and women participating in a *boyen* ceremony (credit: L. Buffavand)

chapter 6). The most recent Mursi migration took place in the 1970s. They settled in Mako, on land in which one of the six Bodi clans, the Mela, had been dwelling until the early twentieth century.

Stone-platforms (*kôroch*) are found throughout Bodiland today. Outsider knowledge of their existence has only recently emerged, and they are not yet fully understood. Current knowledge shows that these are built for when a sacrifice is carried out (*boyen*), either publicly at a priest's (*komorut*) compound or with more privacy in the bush. The platforms are important locations bound up in the ritual killing of cattle, which takes place for a variety of reasons. Their size varies because they are built gradually at each sacrifice. Sacrifices are discontinued at these locations when Bodi move to other places in the landscape. For the first sacrifice at any location, the first three stones that will form the centre of a platform are positioned together in an arrangement replicating a hearth. For the second sacrifice, six stones will be laid so as to encircle the first three stones, and for each following sacrifice as many stones as necessary will be laid to complete a neat circle.

Men and cattle arrive in readiness for a *boyen* ceremony (credit: L. Buffavand)

When a teenage boy sacrifices a cow in the bush for the first time he is undergoing purification and his entry into manhood. His entire body is washed with the blood from the cow, washing him from his childhood and severing him from his mother's – woman's – world. As he grows older and throughout his adult life, he is able to perform a sacrifice in public at the priest's compound. This public space is where the most elaborate forms of *boyen* sacrificial rituals are held. There are many reasons for why a man may feel urged to hold a sacrifice. It may relate to his honour within the community – the sacrifice being enacted as a curse supposed to provoke the death of the offenders to whom it is directed. Many reasons for holding a sacrifice relate in some way to cattle, particularly a favoured ox, such as when a bell is tied to it for the first time, when it is sick, and when it dies.

On the death of a favoured ox a sequence of practices take place around the *boyen* sacrifice. The owner of the ox enters the central ground of the priest's settlement at midday with his cattle herd. He is adorned with a square of cow skin (*bula*) that he wears on his back, and small bells are tied under his knees. He wears a bullet-belt strapped to his waist, with an ostrich feather fastened to his head with numerous pieces of cloth signifying a colour that is personal to him and his cattle. Whilst holding a banner made of cow skin (*longon*), an ox of a colour not personal to him is killed by a rock-blow to the head. As part of the ceremony the dead cow's intestines are laid out on a bed of leaves for a reading. If the reading leads to favourable predictions of the future, then the animal's blood is retained in a calabash vessel, its meat then roasted and eaten by men from the local community according to the generation order, all under the priest's shade tree. Afterwards, the man for whom the *boyen* sacrifice was conducted sits naked on the priest's wooden gaming board (*gelech*), his back turned to the stone ring platform, and an ivory tusk (*oton*) – a sacred object used by the priest and a symbol of his generation-set – is placed on his lap. He and these objects are then washed in the blood of the sacrificed ox. A mixture of sour milk and water is poured both into the mouth

Collection of potent artefacts and calabash of ox blood at the base of a tree (credit: L. Buffavand)

Elders pour libations of milk on stone arrangements (credit: L. Buffavand)

Women often enter a trance state during the ceremony (credit: L. Buffavand)

of the ivory tusk and upon the ground. Next the men witnessing the ceremony each blow through the tusk, which is then washed again with blood and milk to ensure the fertility and health of the community.

Women, who have been waiting near to the compound during the ceremony, may only enter after the men and cattle have been washed with blood. At this moment they face the fire where the meat has roasted and sing songs of praise. Women who belong to the clan of the sacrificer's are particularly active in showing their support; some may even fall into a trance. As the cacophony escalates, the men enthusiastically run about the compound in a type of ceremonial war performance (*du'en*). Finally, a collection of new stones is added to the platform along with the remaining blood and chyme from the animal's stomach. The *boyen* sacrifice concludes with ceremonial dance.

Stones being added to an existing *kôroch* (credit: L. Buffavand)

The basic material details that are documented for the Bodi *kôroch* platforms share intriguing similarities with recent archaeological findings of stone platforms in Mursiland to the south. The stone platforms found at the Arichukgirong range at Dirikoro, and known locally as *benna kulugto* (see chapter 6), are in many ways similar in their material associations (stone-built, animal bone, acids indicative of blood and stomach contents) to the *kôroch* of the Bodi, though differ in design, scale and setting. Although the *benna kulugto* platforms date from seventeenth century, it is tempting to propose some historical connection or common origins for both architectural traditions. Interestingly, Bodi elders assert that about eight generations ago, the Bodi's ancestors built stone platforms of a considerably more impressive size than those built today. Indeed, these were so large that they required working parties to construct them.

Future archaeological and anthropological research amongst communities in the lands of the Bodi and Mursi is the only means by which the connections between platform and sacrificial traditions across time and across communities may be understood. The reasons as to why differences occur, and why some traditions and places where ceremonies were once enacted became abandoned in place of others will enhance our understanding of ethnic migration and religious agency in the Lower Omo Valley, where historical records otherwise leave only tantalising clues.

Ox skulls in a tree above a *kôroch* in Gia, Bodiland (credit: T. Clack)

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19. The Hamar: Living By, For and With the Cattle

Jérôme Dubosson

Pastoral communities experience life through and in relation to cattle. In this contribution the cattle-centred world of the Hamar is described. What does it mean to live by, for and with cattle?

The Hamar are one of the larger ethnic groups in the Lower Omo region. They live in small community settlements scattered in the extreme southwest of Ethiopia. The territory they currently occupy extends from the Woito River in the Rift Valley in the east to the plains and hills of the lower Omo Valley in the west. To the north and northwest, their habitat borders the Banna and Bashada territories. These three groups together form a larger cultural entity, that is, they speak the same language belonging to the South Omotic family, practice intermarriage, have many institutions and rituals in common, and their origins are intimately linked.

The Hamar are agro-pastoralists with a mixed economy, like most groups in Lower Omo Valley. They practice agriculture, apiculture (beekeeping), hunting and gathering, but they consider pastoralism as a 'superior' mode of subsistence. Indeed, the acquisition of livestock in large numbers through various mechanisms (raids, exchanges for cereals, honey or goats, marriages, donations or requests from family members or friends, inheritance) is a symbol of social and economic success amongst the Hamar, as for other African pastoral groups. The Hamar raise goats, sheep, cattle, and, in some rare cases, camels, acquired through governmental and non-governmental organizations. They have different practices and ideas according to each domesticated species.

In the land of the Hamar, women and men live by, for and with cattle. Indeed, they grow up in an environment strongly steeped in pastoralism. The close relationship between human and animal manifests itself every day and in many ways. It is perceptible in the spatial organization of settlements (cattle pens are located inside villages, right next to the dwellings), in material culture (cowhides on which the Hamar rest, eat and sleep; skirts made of goatskin; horns used as containers for ostrich feathers, tobacco or butter), in immaterial culture (dances and songs that glorify cattle), etc. The relationship is established from early childhood. At birth, children are fed butter and, later, goat and cow's milk, and their skin is regularly coated with butter. They sleep on leather skins and hear by day and by night the sound of the bells and the voices of their animals grazing around them or resting in the pens. They live surrounded by the animal presence that awakens their five senses. Children start by imitating adults by playing with stones or fruits collected on the paths; these are their animals. They draw cattle pens, rivers, houses, wells, etc., on the ground. When they are older, they are taught about pastoral knowledge, how to observe and understand the nature and the

Left to right: Hamar herder at Dile Bala; Hamar men and cattle inside a cattle camp (credit: J. Dubosson and G. Matthieu)

needs of their livestock. They become familiar with the animals by getting to know their personal names, by following the older people who guide the cattle through the pastures and to the wells near the villages, simply by taking care of their welfare. All these interactions with the livestock have a significant effect on their human identity.

Cattle, the most valued asset in Hamar culture, are indeed an essential element of the sense of self. This is particularly true for adolescents and young men who are primarily responsible for raising small and large livestock and who proudly define themselves as *waki-edi*, literally meaning *cattle people*. During his life, a Hamar receives different names, of different origins and social importance (see chapter 9), but defining each of the specific aspects of his person. In the land of the Hamar, a fundamental trait is the omnipresence of cattle. In this context, the attribution of cattle-inspired names to humans does not serve to bestialize individuals, but on the contrary to humanize them.

Thus, to become adult members of their community and to be allowed to marry and to have children, for example, all young men must successfully perform a rite of passage, whose last step is known as the cattle-

Hamar children in Dambaiti make fake cattle and cattle pens with stones and sand respectively (credit: J. Dubosson)

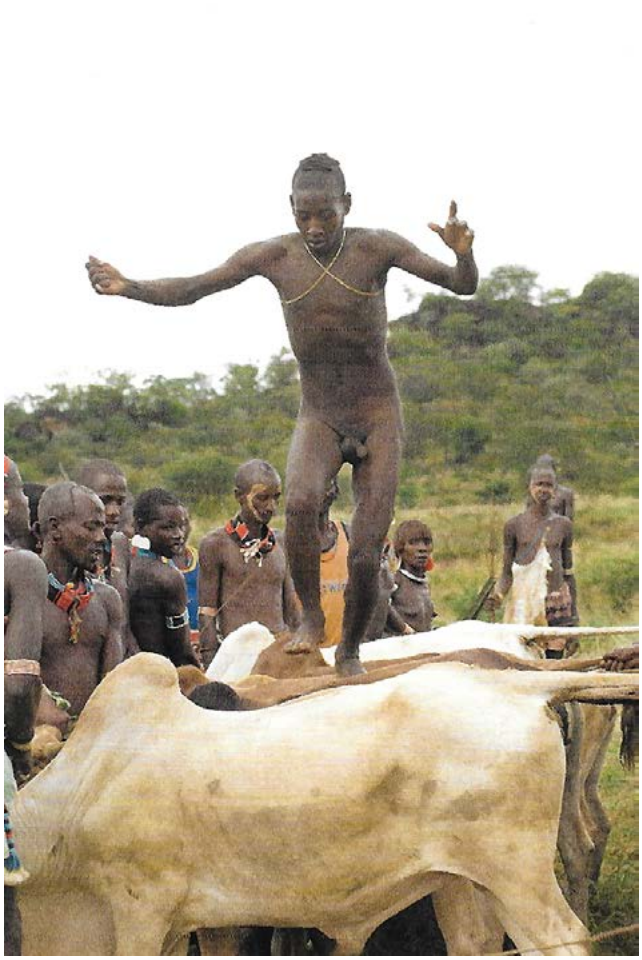
jumping initiation (*ukuli*). This consists of jumping and running over a column of cattle next to each other, in total four times, twice in each direction, and without once tripping or falling. The young men then receive a name inspired by the colour pattern of the female calf (*garro*) which stands at the front of the column, and then these men are called 'father/owner' (*imba*) of this or that colour pattern. If these young people also decide to have a favourite animal (*errawak*), then they will get an additional name, designated by the same way, or even more names if they choose to have several favourite animals, goats, oxen or bulls with assorted colour patterns. The *garro*-names and the *errawak*-names not only evoke the animals by their colour patterns, but also suggest how herders should act towards such animals. That is, a Hamar should act like a father (*imba*) to his animal and consider it as his son.

Hamar girl and boy milking a cow inside the family cattle enclosure, Dambaiti (credit: J. Dubosson)

Chosen for their physical qualities, their behaviour and their supposed apotropaic power, the animals only become true *errawak* if they successfully endure several permanent bodily modifications that are prescribed by tradition. These are castration, cutting of the dewlap in the shape of a pendant, cutting of ears into a notched pattern, clay or paint-marking of the hide with geometric patterns, and horn-shaping. They occur in several stages and help to forge and maintain cultural and socio-political relations between herders, since they can only be achieved with the help of others. The modifications can be considered as a beautifying process and a rite of passage for the animals (see chapter 11). They authenticate their new identity, often acquired in pain. They indicate an almost ontological change, because favourite animals no longer fall into the category of domestic animals (*k'olle*), like other members of the herd, but become *errawak*, closer to the human world.

The Hamar's commitment to their herds, their 'passion' for their domestic animals, is revealed in a panoply of practices and ideas. This pastoral ideal is found in the cattle-jumping initiation and the phenomenon of favourite animals. Indeed, age-mates (*anamo*) – individuals of the same age grade – should address each other with their cow's *errawak* name and married women and girls should address the men with their *garro-*

Hamar girl with goat-skin dress carrying her brother on the way to the village (credit: J. Dubosson)



An *ukuli* cattle-jumping initiation (credit: I. Strecker)

A herder and favourite animal at Dile Bala cattle camp (credit: J. Dubosson)

name. Moreover, a herder will strongly identify himself with his favourite animal, especially when he sings for it, raising his arms to imitate the shape of the animal's horns. It is said that in this motion he too becomes *errawak*. A Hamar's identification with his favourite animal extends further than this, because his and his *errawak's* destiny and good fortune (*barjo*) are said to become one and the same – inseparable. Anthropologist Ivo Strecker refers to *barjo* as 'a concept of continuous creation', and it is significant that a man's *barjo* is his favourite animal.

Hamar favourite animal with permanent bodily modifications, including shaped horns, decorated hide, cut ears and pendant (credit: J. Dubosson)

Cattle are the primary medium by which Hamar men and women express and define their relationships and identities. Cattle are a true wealth that is not only material, but also relational and symbolic, and this undoubtedly goes some way to explain the persistence and complexity of pastoralism in this part of the world.

Hamar man sitting with his cattle (credit: J. Dubosson)

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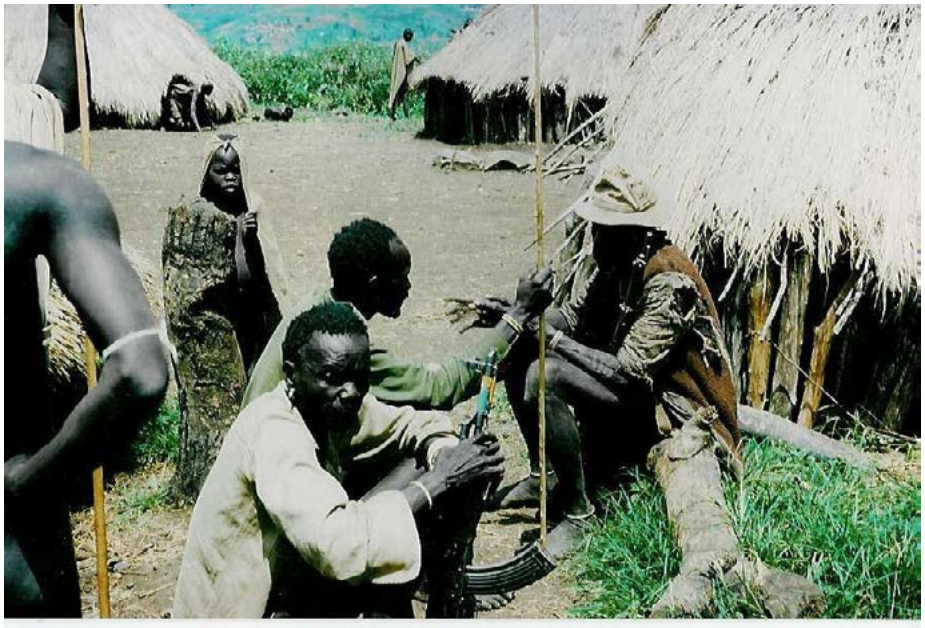
20. The Suri

Jon Abbink

Living in a fragile and unstable border area near South Sudan, the Suri have a remarkable but tragic recent history. How have automatic weapons, conflict and development injured their culture, identity and prospects?

Numbering about 32,000, the Suri have to deal with an ever-shrinking territory and multiple challenges: state policy transforming their lands, socio-cultural and religious change, and harsh competition with neighbouring groups (mostly their enemies). One could call the Suri a people in a phase of 'accelerated history', emerging from virtual neglect and oblivion in the 1960-70s, when they lived as a 'marginal' and autonomous people in a peripheral area, to being one of the most discussed and beleaguered minorities in Ethiopia.

Traditional Suri village after the rains (credit: J. Abbink)



Suri men in discussion (credit: J. Abbink)

The reasons: their lands were designated as prime 'investment areas', they were discovered as a tourist attraction, their territory holds alluvial gold resources, and they stood 'in the way' of state and state-supported projects in land acquisition, huge sugar plantation outlays, and commercial farms. In addition, new infrastructure (dams, roads and irrigation systems) has been at the cost of their local livelihoods systems and environment.

The South Sudanese wars have led people, such as the Toposa and Nyangatom, to the Ethiopian border just west of the Suri, and their territory and livelihoods were again further undermined. There are no efficient overarching mediatory initiatives or contacts on the level of local leaders and district administrators that keep track of, or solve, these tensions.

In the wake of these challenges, the Suri way of life, their agro-pastoral system with key economic but also sociocultural assets such as livestock (mainly cattle, but also goats and some sheep), gold, and hunting-gathering resources, has been much undermined. Indeed, a count of the last 20 years has shown a decline in the number of cattle per family head and literally ever less space to graze their cattle or find resources from the environment. In my estimate about a third of their cattle have been stolen by neighbouring raiders in that period, and the recovery rate has been low. Some household heads lost more than 90 percent of their cattle.

To make matters worse, the Ethiopian government has not protected the Suri, not even against Sudanese trespassers. It also has constantly urged the Suri, in a kind of civilizational morality tale, to 'become modern', give up 'harmful customs', follow state education, reduce their cattle herds and turn into sedentary

Suri woman and children (credit: J. Abbink)

cultivators. This model is deeply resented by the Suri, who derive their identity and dignity from being herders and livestock owners and want to make their own decisions.

Although they do cultivate gardens and fields for sorghum, maize and other products and are good at it, they have no affinity for an exclusively sedentary peasant life. They also say, rightly, that their life as herders gives them not only independence, but also economic security – cattle is capital – and makes them more wealthy and well-fed than their cultivator neighbours, for example, the Dizi, Bench and Me'en. Furthermore, Suri social relations are highly dependent on cattle for bridewealth and other exchanges. Indeed, cattle for them, as for most pastoralist peoples, cannot just be seen as 'economic products' but also as part of their social universe and well-being. The complexity of pastoralism as a way of life and culture is well-known in the research literature but not among the Ethiopian administration dealing with them or, if so, it is devalued and bypassed.

One major factor of change among the Suri a generation ago (in the early the 1980s), was the introduction of automatic rifles. It was one of the immediate effects of the civil war in Sudan, although highland traders in the villages in the southwest also imported rifles and especially ammunition for sale. So, Suri and gradually also their neighbours acquired the new weapons. A mini arms race began. The Suri were initially able to dominate their competitor southern neighbours, the Nyangatom, but, since 1988, these recovered and retaliated, and the Suri were chased out of their traditional areas on the border around Mount Naita.

The Suri's fate was sealed, so to speak, when the Nyangatom allied with the South Sudanese Toposa. The Toposa are a large people, one that has encroached historically on Ethiopian territory, who took over traditional Suri pastures, which up to the 1970s had offered grazing for many of their herds in the plains of South Sudan, north of the Ilemi Triangle. Now, any return of Suri, especially the Chai-Suri, the largest section, to their homeland is impossible. Indeed, among the present generation of Suri, the memory of Naita is fading, and many elders have given up on the idea of ever 'going back'.

This movement means that the Suri's traditional ritual places - graveyards of past ritual leaders (*komoru*) and initiation places for age-set ceremonies or for installing a new *komoru* – are inaccessible. The Suri may, for instance, also have stone monuments like the Mursi and Bodi (see chapters 6 and 18), but these are no longer in their territory. The processes of displacement and livelihood loss have thus led to cultural loss and a decline of collective identity. This traumatic trajectory may have also contributed to the stark internal problems of the Suri, who have presently a high rate of internal conflict and killings. It is not only in clashes with neighbouring groups or due to government repression that people have been killed. In all, the number of people killed over the past two decades due to homicides, brawls, clashes, raider violence and government punitive action runs into many hundreds. No Suri family

A traditional Suri house (credit: J. Abbink)

is untouched by the effects of this violence.

A new government-sponsored Suri house, with tin roof, 2016 (credit: J. Abbink)

The Suri have their own administrative unit called 'Surma *woreda*' (district), instituted under the current Ethiopian ethno-federal system in 1994. But they have little real power, and the Suri employed by this unit must obey orders from the federal government, without much room to make their own suggestions for local policy. They must go along with economic changes, which encourage foreign and non-local investors, and 'development' plans, which include 'resettlement' schemes to regroup hamlets and homesteads into larger blocks of villages. Resettlement villages are composed of buildings with 'modern' tin roofings. These 'houses' are obligatory and constructed under a government programme and not by Suri themselves. They are badly constructed and not fit for the local climate and conditions. These buildings are resented, but people moved in because they were incentivized by maize rations.

The Ethiopian government has not allowed a homegrown Suri leadership to develop. There are misgivings about the current, co-opted Suri officials in the district, and those who voice local complaints, grievances, or even alternative ideas, are usually demoted or arrested. A few have been killed. Two Suri sections (Chai and Tirmaga) are also increasingly antagonistic toward each other. A third section, the Baale, who partly live in South Sudan, are more marginal but face similar problems. This emerging tension has also impacted on local peace.

Suri are well-known in the international tourist circuit (especially that of 'tribal tourism' and 'off-the beaten-track' adventurers), with Addis Ababa-based tour operators organizing safari-like photographic trips to them. Many documentary photographers and film-makers have visited the Suri, producing often

Suri girls in Maji on market day (credit: J. Abbink)

'spectacular' and visually attractive photobooks or films. This regular tourist and visitor stream since the mid-1990s has produced important cash resources for the Suri - and for the local Surma-district authorities, which oblige the tourists each to pay a hefty daily fee.

The Suri have trouble in reconciling 'tradition' and 'modernity' and adapting to the major political and economic challenges that beset them. Partly, this is due to internal disarray, disturbed generational relations, and militarization (due to the spread of weapons, on which they are now necessarily dependent to defend themselves against South Sudanese raiders and their neighbours). The other part is their creeping economic disempowerment by the Ethiopian administration and a lack of effective communication channels with the government, which has fed distrust and misunderstandings. In this respect, ethnic federalism, the still reigning political model of Ethiopia on the regional and district levels, has not worked well for the Suri. They

do not get real recognition of their agro-pastoral way of life, and their culture is usually seen as 'backward' and in need of reform.

While Suri welcome education, health services, and better market opportunities, they have not been able to profit from them. The government seems more interested in their land and resources, than in the people themselves. There is scope and need for fundamental improvements in governance in the Suri area, whereby the people themselves should be engaged and seen partners in, and not objects of, 'development'.

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21. Kwegu: Hunters of the River

Lucie Buffavand

The Kwegu are a constellation of small groups established along the Omo River. Contrary to the other peoples of the Lower Omo Valley, they do not define themselves as pastoralists, but as hunters. They occupy a marginal position vis-à-vis the dominant groups which have incorporated them.

Kwegu communities live in close proximity to the Omo River all year round, and are at home in its dense riverine forest. They define themselves as hunters, though they also practice fishing, gathering, and apiculture (beekeeping). These activities have been seriously affected by the completion of the Gibe III dam and the regulation of the river flows, as well the development of commercial agriculture in their land. Whereas they used to farm the inundated banks of the river during the dry season, slash-and-burn cultivation carried out in forested land during the rainy season is now their only source of cereals, of which sorghum and maize are their staple food.

The settlements of the Kwegu are scattered along the Omo River, from the south of the Mago River's mouth to the Shorum, a tributary of the Omo River in the north. The northern Kwegu number only a few hundred people living under the patronage of their Bodi and Mursi neighbours, who call them *Yidi* and *Ngidini*. A large group of about five hundred Kwegu lives independently in the village of Kuchur, on the western side of the Omo. Their Kara neighbours call them *Moguji*, and they have been assimilated as a minority group within the Kara. There are hardly any contacts between the northern Kwegu and the southern Kwegu. This is in part owing to the geographical distance between them, but is also a result of their differences in language. Although these groups have their own common Kwegu language, which has been classified within the Surmic family, those living with Kara, Mursi and Bodi have gradually adopted the respective languages of these people, and Kwegu is rarely spoken amongst today's younger generation.

Kwegu are depicted in the oral traditions of other local groups as the first inhabitants of the Lower Omo Valley. Over time they have also assimilated waves of migrants coming from other groups. The Kwegu of Kuchur, for example, point to origins from Aari, Bodi, Mursi and Arbore. Conversely, some northern Kwegu have joined from the region to the marginalized groups of hunters from the Omotic highlands, such as the Dime or Dizi.

Before the arrival of today's pastoralists, Kwegu were not confined just to the Omo riverine forest but lived with access to vast areas of land. Traditional oral histories recount that the Bodi fought and conquered them, although Mursi and Kara tell of a more peaceful subordination. In historical accounts recited by the dominant groups, the Kwegu are pictured as having been found in a state of ignorance concerning herding

Young Kwegu and Bodi inaugurating a new dug-out canoe in the Gura River (credit: F. Girke)

Kwegu in Bodiland with a hippopotamus foot over his shoulder. Taken in 1969, this is likely the first photograph ever taken of a Kwegu (credit: D. Turton)

(Bodi) or even cultivation (Kara). These myths are recalled to justify the dominant groups' control of the main or most valued means of subsistence: land and/or cattle. Kwegu were integrated as a minority group in a social network. Marriage between Kwegu and other ethnic groups is prohibited, and they are denied any political autonomy. Despite their marginalized position, Kwegu were given ritual or mediating roles in accordance with their autochthonous status, and they used to be the arbiters of land disputes among Kara. Nevertheless, they are largely defined by what makes them the opposite of the dominant groups: living in the wild, with no ownership of cattle and lacking in 'civilized' manners.

Among the northern Kwegu, each adult man has a Mursi or Bodi patron. The Kwegu provide services, such as ferrying across the river in dug-out canoes, and tributes in the form of honey and game meat. During most of the twentieth century, Kwegu also supplied ivory and leopard skins, which their patrons could then exchange for cattle or rifles. Kwegu marriages are organized by their Mursi and Bodi patrons by the giving of animal stock for the bridewealth, thus making Kwegu dependent on them for their continued reproduction. Kara, because they live by the river all year and have developed the skills appropriate to this environment, are not as dependent on Kwegu for services and have stopped arranging Kwegu marriages. Their domination used to rest on the issue of farmland by the Omo River. Contrary to northern Kwegu, who had their own plots of land on the riverbanks, southern Kwegu were supposedly tricked out of the riverbank fields by Kara, who would then grant them access.

Kwegu social organization has adopted the clans, age-sets, generation-sets and ritual offices of their patrons. Mursi and Bodi oral traditions tell of a brotherly relation between the ancestor of their ritual leader and that of the Kwegu, who separated after the Kwegu ancestor had breached a food taboo. Although the northern Kwegu have come to share some items of their patrons' pastoralist culture, such as cattle names, they celebrate their distinctive skills of hunting and fishing.

For many years, the late Shapo Chaka, a Moguji, was the only acknowledged diviner in Kara. His divination was based on throwing miniature leather 'sandals' and interpreting their respective position. Photograph taken in Gorrente, Kara in 2007 (credit: F. Girke)

Bodi man adorning 'his' Kwegu for a dance, 2011 (credit: F. Girke)

Kwegu ferries goods across the river in a dug-out canoe (credit: F. Girke)

The southern Kwegu attempted to reverse their political situation in the 1990s when they rejected the domination of Kara and went to live in Nyangatom. There, they faced less discrimination and Nyangatom would intermarry with them. A move towards political visibility was achieved for the southern Kwegu in the same period when they obtained their own administrative district for their village of Kuchur.

The recent changes brought by the Gibe III dam and the development of irrigated commercial agriculture along the Omo are deeply affecting Kwegu livelihoods. The Kwegu are bound to become even more destitute than their pastoralist neighbours, since they have no livestock available to convert into grains in these times of chronic hunger. The destruction of most of the forest and bushland that characterized their areas has been highly traumatic, representing the loss of their familiar environment where they had developed their own skills and identity. The future of the new Kwegu generation lies in low-paid plantation jobs, in which they are again confronted with discrimination.

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Part 5: Finding the Omo – Threats and Impacts

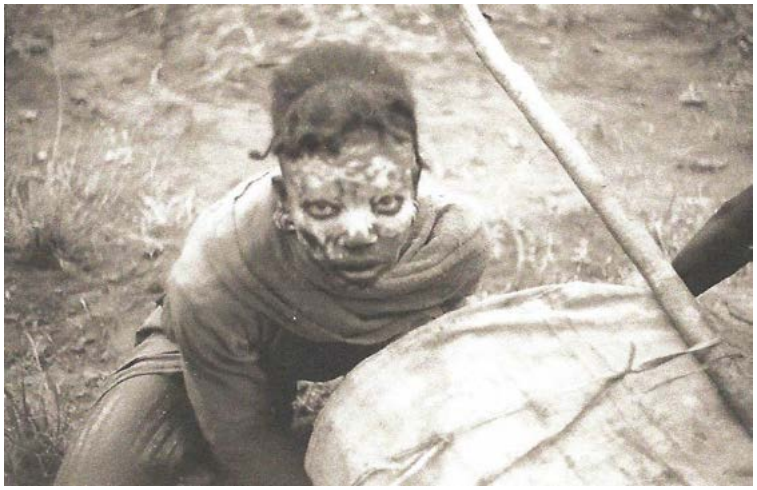
Sitting under a tree, a Mursi elder wears a Soviet-style military peaked cap (likely Ethiopian military) and a cotton blanket (likely from Kenya) whilst holding a Chinese variant AK47 rifle (credit: T. Clack)

22. Written Past: Explorers' Histories

Marco Bassi

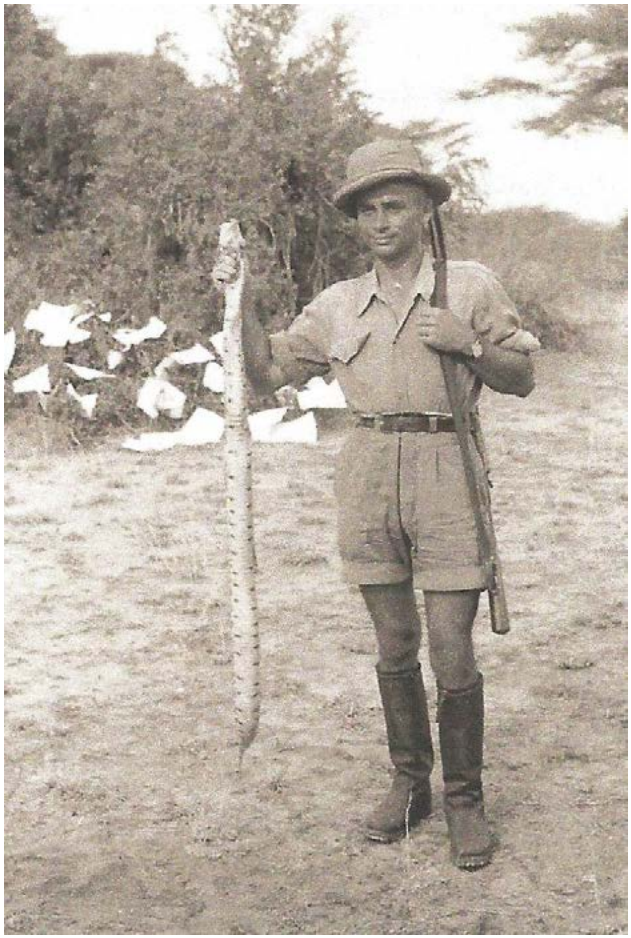
The first historical accounts of Mursi were produced by a limited number of explorers, hunters, missionaries and scientists. Sometimes these accounts align with oral histories and oftentimes they do not. What can be learnt from these early annotations from the past?

The Lower Omo Valley appeared in European writings in the second half of the nineteenth century. Sadly, the written sources on the people of the valley are so bound to the European colonial enterprise that no new record was produced when their territory was incorporated into the Abyssinian Empire. It was only more than half a century later that the people of the Lower Omo Valley 're-appeared' as a specific interest of modern anthropology. During the 1930s, two scientific expeditions by the French palaeontologist Camille Arambourg and the British geologist and explorer Vivian Fuchs ignored the people. Even the Italian short occupation, which lasted only two years in this region (1937-1938), did not produce much more than a few maps and good photographs, despite the expedition to the Sagan-Omo by Edoardo Zavattari, a racist but attentive scholar. His previous expedition to Borana country had resulted in an impressive series of publications in the ethnographic, botanic and zoological fields. However, the post-World War II political and cultural revolutions led the Italians to suppress the historical memory of the colonial experience, along with the Fascist regime and the monarchy. Most of Zavattari's notes and collections on the Omo Valley were lost in Italy.

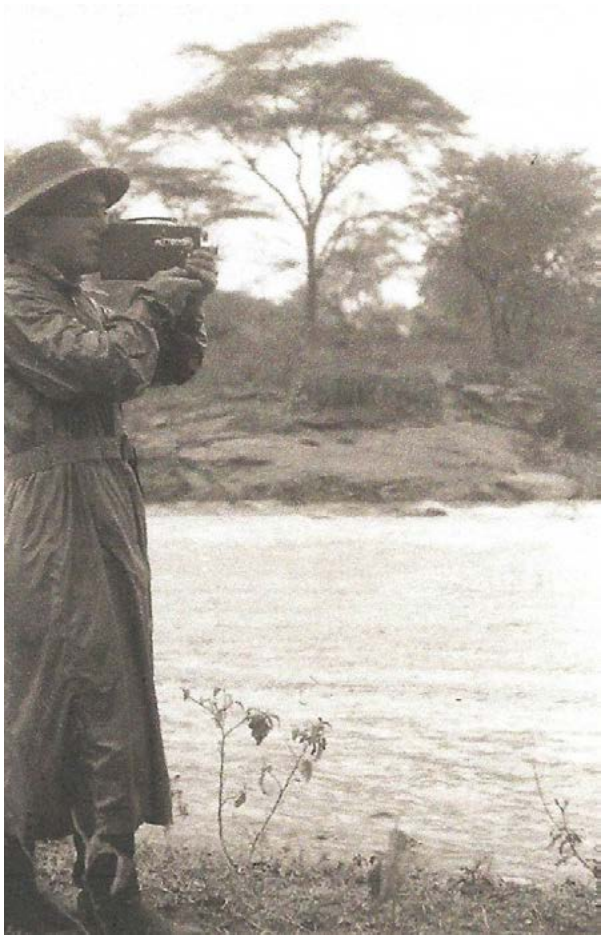


A photograph taken in 1939 of a 'sciangalla' woman from the expedition archive of Edoardo Zavattari. As 'sciangalla' is a negative term used by highlanders to refer to Surmic people, the woman is likely from the Mursi or Suri groups.

This is the virtual reversal of the story of Vittorio Bóttego's exploration, resulting in the publication in 1899 of the outstanding *Seconda spedizione Bòttego: L'Omo, viaggio d'esplorazione nell'Africa orientale.* Bóttego knew very well the Italian territorial interests in the region. Accordingly, he convinced the authorities to provide institutional support to his project to discover the outlet of the Omo River. With Maurizio Sacchi, and Lieutenants Vannutelli and



Italo Archetti with a captured snake in the Murle area in 1939 during Edoardo Zavattari's expedition to the Omo



Oreste Maestri filming as part of Edoardo Zavattari's expedition, Keske, 1939

Citerni, he approached the Omo River from the east and followed it downstream, until in 1896 they discovered its outlet in Lake Turkana. Unfortunately, the Italian authorities failed to alert Bóttego that they had in the meanwhile decided to invade Ethiopia, thus changing his status from that of an 'explorer' to 'military enemy'. It is a miracle that the expedition continued for several months, until, that is, Sacchi was killed on his way back to Somalia and Bóttego on his way to Addis Ababa, when he reached an Oromo military post.

After the diplomatic negotiations, Emperor Menelik II not only released Vannutelli and Citerni, but also delivered the field notes and collections of the deceased explorers, making the publication of the book possible. Bóttego's mandate included the establishment of good relations with people that were regarded as future members of the Italian overseas territories. His descriptions are accordingly detailed and geographically reliable. As with most explorers' accounts, the style of the book reveals the European prejudices of the time against people with simple technology, hence 'needing' the civilizing actions of colonials. Yet, there are sentences that reveal a sincere admiration for the natives' ability and cleverness.

British Nigerian soldiers removing Italian frontier markers from the Kenyan-Abyssinian border, 1941

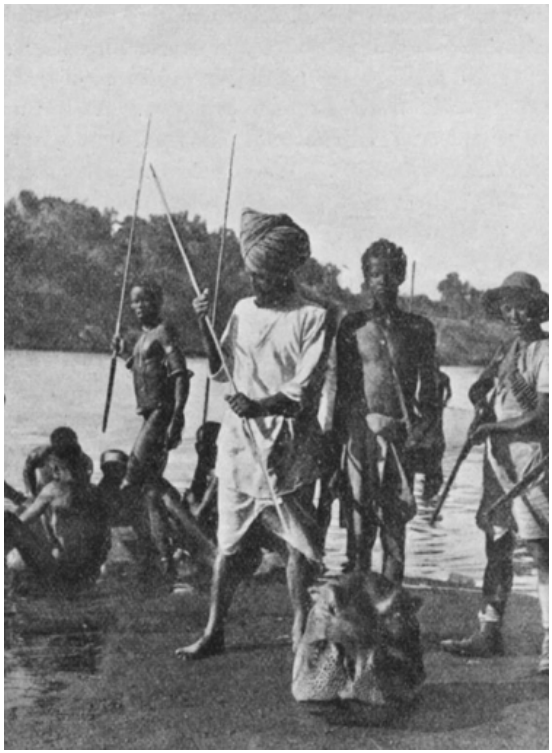
Bóttego was not the first European to reach the Lower Omo Valley. Three expeditions before him approached the area from south and east, thus failing to identify the local water course as the Omo River. In 1888, Sámuel Teleki and Ludwig von Höhnel reached the northern part of Lake Turkana with their Austrian expedition. In 1895, Arthur Donaldson Smith managed to move a bit further upstream. Donaldson Smith is the first of a series of travellers mixing geographical curiosity with passion for adventure and game hunting. These travellers self-organised and self-sponsored their expeditions, often paying for them through the sale of ivory. The fact that they were moving in unknown countries justified the publication of their travel

Sámuel Teleki's portrait

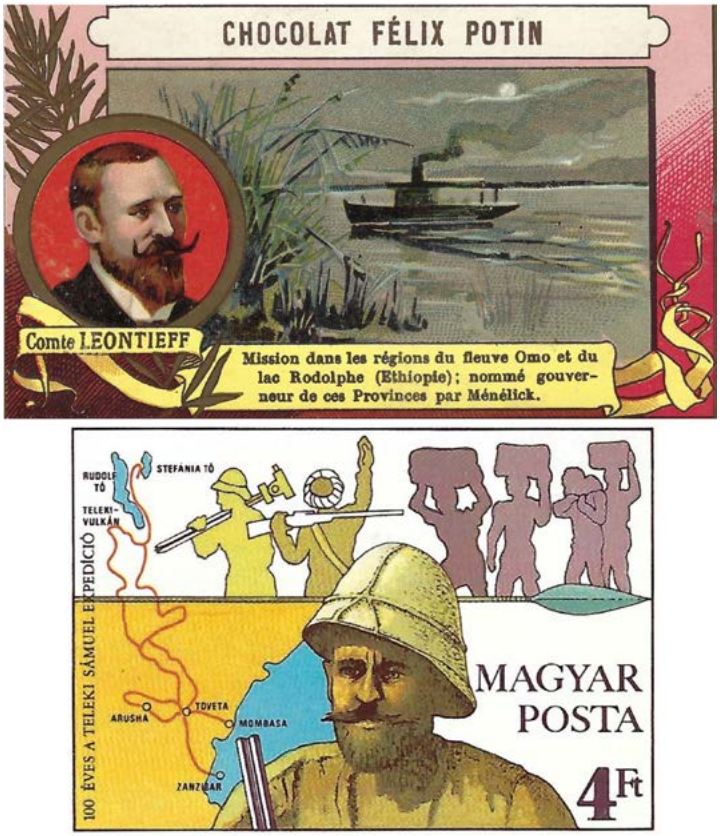
accounts in geographical journals or books. However, their descriptions lack the accuracy derived by the scientific and often multidisciplinary preparation imposed by institutional sponsors. Indeed, each scientific exploration from this period generated one full account in the form of a book and several articles. Between 1895 and 1896, Oscar Neumann was the next to reach the Lower Omo Valley, on a hunting expedition, followed in 1897 by Henry Cavendish and Harry Andrew. This was the last European visit before the annexation of the region by the Ethiopian Empire.

The first large-scale Abyssinian military campaign was led by Fitawrari Habte Giyorgis in 1898. He came down from the north, along the western bank of the Omo River. It was common practice to legitimise colonial expansions with scientific accounts. On that occasion this role was taken up by Alexander Bulatovich, a Russian military attaché, who described the extreme violence of Giyorgis' campaign. The year after another Russian, Nicolai Stéphanovitch Leontieff, led a bizarre military campaign from the east, a sort of 'private colonial enterprise' on behalf of Menelik II, with soldiers from Russia, Ethiopia and Senegal, a French colony. He published one article and a pamphlet. In 1898, just before

Sámuel Teleki and his caravan, 1888



Photograph of locals and aliens in Mursiland taken during the 1899 expedition of Donaldson Smith



Celebrity and the Omo. A French chocolate advertisement drawing on the celebrity status of the Russian adventurer-explorer, Nicolai Stéphanovitch Leontieff (top) and a postage stamp from Hungary depicting Samuel Teleki and his expedition to East Africa (bottom)

Leontieff's campaign, Herbert Austin opened a series of British surveys aimed to define the frontier with Ethiopia. He was followed in 1899 by Montagu Wellby, in 1900 by James Harrison and others, in 1903 by Philip Maud, and in 1909 by Charles W. Gwynn.

Most of these surveys were conducted by military personnel in agreement with the Ethiopian authorities. The typical public output was an article for *The Geographical Journal*. The British colonial project was for a while

Modern research fieldwork in the Lower Omo, especially large-scale and remote interventions such as the Mursiland Heritage Project, can be reminiscent of elements of expeditions from the golden age of exploration. Modern researchers/explorers, however, work with local consent and through a strict ethical framework (credit: A. Arzoz)

conflicting with the French dream to link Africa from East to West. This idea inspired the French Aristocrat Robert du Bourg de Bozas' exploration, crossing the region in 1902. This was the last institutionally supported scientific mission, the findings from which were regularly sent back to France. The book of the expedition, *Mission Scientifique du Bourg De Bozas: De la Mer Rouge à l'Atlantique à travers l'Afrique tropicale (Octobre 1900 –*

Mai 1903), though written by historian Fernand Maurette (thus producing an additional interpretative layer between the raw material and the final product), discloses a degree of interaction between the explorers and the people of the Lower Omo Valley, unrivalled by any other account.

The 'golden age' of the European travels to the region was closed in 1909 by C. H. Stigand, again an independent traveller and hunter. Altogether, these 21 years produced a large number of sequential accounts that enables the historian to apply validating techniques to observations that on their own would have little reliability. They have also provided a quite accurate description of the main human and environmental events of the process that forcibly brought the people of the Lower Omo Valley under the domination of the Ethiopian empire and, with that, for the very first time into the condition of statehood.

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23. Last Chance to See? Intangible Heritage and Responsible Tourism

Tamás Régi and Timothy Clack

Tourists from all over the world are attracted to, and visit, the peoples and parks of the Lower Omo Valley. They come to witness pastoral peoples living in an alien environment and engaged in a different way of life with unusual customs and traditions. In short, the tourist comes to experience the exotic. Not all dimensions of this encounter are positive. Where's the harm?

People change. People change people. Given this, it is not surprising that Mursi heritage is impacted by 'outsiders'; irrespective of whether they are tourists, traders, travellers, missionaries or researchers. Tourists leave a significant impression because they comprise the largest body of outsiders to visit. Indeed, over the past decade Mursiland has received an increasing number of international tourists, mainly from Western countries. In part, this relates to the fact that different agencies, inside and outside of Ethiopia, above all the Ethiopian government, have presented the Lower Omo Valley as one of the last primitive, wild and tribal territories of Africa.

A Japanese tourist takes a photograph of a Mursi woman (credit: A. Arzoz)

A tourist village, Solbu, on a busy day of contact (credit: T. Régi)

The image of Mursiland as an unspoilt wilderness is attractive in an otherwise urban, high-technological and resource-depleted world, and ensures the flows of tourists to the Lower Omo Valley from all over the world. The consequence is a growing number of daily encounters between the Mursi and tourists over recent years. What is rather surprising, especially given the distances travelled, is that the average Mursi-tourist encounter rarely lasts more than forty minutes. This small window of opportunity results in both parties trying to 'maximise' the results of their meeting and this, in turn, often creates tension. In many instances, the outcome is an uneasy encounter with disappointment on both sides. On the one hand, the tourists pursue their image of the primitive local, wanting to document it with photographs and small material souvenirs. On the other hand, the Mursi perceive tourists as aliens with massive material wealth and want to extract money.

When two radically different cultures collide certain social and cultural changes inevitably occur on both sides. The main sandy road through Mursiland is the only channel of mobility for outsiders and it draws in local people to participate in tourist encounters. Somewhat unavoidably, this contact zone creates new nomadic movements which do not always correlate with customary seasonal patterns of mobility between the Omo River and higher grasslands. Numerous Mursi settlements have, for example, grown up along the

Lip-plates for sale: a tourist surrounded by Mursi people in a tourist village (credit: T. Régi)

road in which most of the inhabitants stay motivated only by meeting and making money from tourists. Tourism does not only change people's habitual mobility, but it also affects the division of labour within groups. In general, as tourists are more interested in photographing females than males, women become the main protagonists of the encounters. As a result, many women abandon their more traditional work on the sorghum fields and stay in tourist villages to earn cash.

Tourism has also been responsible for changing local material culture. Beside photography the other income source for the Mursi is the selling of small souvenirs to their visitors. In recent years Mursi women have alienated certain objects from their material tradition and started to sell them on to tourists. The chief thing to sell, of course, is the lip-plate. In the eye of the Western tourist this is perhaps the most famous cultural 'brand' the Mursi possess, selling at the premium rate of around 10 Ethiopian Birr (ETB) [1 USD = 28 ETB]. However, in order to increase prices and sell more, Mursi women have begun to decorate the surfaces of their lip-plates (see chapter 13). Consequently, this process has led to competition between women.

Another change takes the form of new ornaments. These have been invented over recent years in response to tourist demand. For example, small animal figurines are sold to tourists for around 5 ETB each. Traditionally figurines were only made as toys for children, and usually made of mud in the form of bull heads. Usually the children made these for play and, because they were fragile, they were destroyed by the end of the game. In contrast the ones produced for tourists today are made from clay and fired to make them solid. There are a wide variety in shapes and forms of these new figurines and they are produced exclusively for sale.

The cash derived from photographs or the sale of plates and figurines, rarely finds its way in the traditional wealth distribution system. Also, after tourists leave the villages, personal conflicts, especially amongst Mursi elders, result from disagreements over money. These are clearly adverse effects of 'whistle-stop' tourism in Mursiland.

International tourism has facilitated Mursi contact with the world outside of the Lower Omo Valley, Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. However, this contact is not without its economic, cultural and ethical challenges. The evolution of tourist crafts, disruption to transhumant or nomadic movements, development of cash economies, and various other fundamental changes to tradition, ritual and culture are cause for concern.

Mursi bull clay figurine produced to sell to tourists (credit: J. Bonet)

Many elements of Mursi culture threatened by these changes are known as 'intangible heritages'. This is a form of heritage that is not necessarily manifest materially and encompasses living expressions and traditions inherited over the generations. Recognising intangible heritage as inherently valuable and fragile, UNESCO lists the South Omo Zone as a global protection priority in five domains: oral traditions, social practices, traditional crafts, performing arts, and practices concerning nature. This means we arrive at a dilemma: As more people visit to witness the uniqueness of the Mursi and their traditional way of life, the more it is transformed irrecoverably.

As there is a universal concern to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of humanity, the solution lies in common sense. All visitors need to appreciate that as well as creating some benefits, processes of social transformation also incur negative outcomes. Ultimately, the solution is one of responsibility for and awareness of the consequences of our actions. This is only possible through knowledge.

Masquerade for the tourist: a Mursi woman wears a non-traditional headdress in an attempt to look more exotic for tourists (credit: T. Régi)

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24. ‘Our Poverty will be Gone’: Hope for a Mursi Community Conservation Area

Will Hurd

The contact the Mursi have made with other pastoral people in Eastern Africa has resulted in many new ideas and understandings. In this contribution, which describes the attempted establishment of a community conservation area (CCA), some of the many challenges and opportunities (and a couple of surprises) surface. Can Mursi be a place where community and conservation meet?

In May 2008, four Mursi visited community conservancies of Rendille, Samburu, and Maasai pastoralists in northern Kenya. Of the four Mursi, two were community leaders, one was an interpreter and one was a man who knew much about conservation. I accompanied them as a second interpreter.

The trip caused much excitement before we set out. When one Mursi man was shown a photographic book of the Maasai he exclaimed ‘These people are really Mursi! They pierce their ears. They drink blood!’ In Mursi tradition there is a group called *Mun a Bar Huli*, a people they broke off from a long time ago. The Mursi thought the Maasai may be them.

We travelled overland into Kenya and the first conservancy we stopped at was the Rendilles’ MeLaKo. There the conservation staff described the benefits their community conservancy had brought. High on the list was security. The two-way radios the staff carried were able to report intruders, virtually stopping cattle raiding. After this, we stopped by a well where many camels, and cattle had come to drink. We asked a Rendille herder his opinion of community conservation. ‘The community conservancy brought these wells. Start your own,’ he said.

At the next stop, Sera Conservation Trust, run by Samburu, the Mursi heard how wildlife conservation fits in with Samburu traditional beliefs. ‘We don’t kill elephants. We believe the elephant was originally a Samburu grandmother,’ they said. ‘We Mursi believe the same thing!’ said the Mursi. ‘The grandmother became tired of her troublesome grandkids, wrapped a sleeping skin around her and left for the forest.’ The Samburu had the same names for certain birds and the same knowledge of how the flight patterns of these birds told one of future events, such as the coming of a malevolent stranger.

The Mursi did not like that the Samburu had quit setting fire to the bush and grasslands, having been convinced to this course of action by outsiders who helped establish the conservancy. ‘Those Samburu are not very smart,’ said the Mursi. ‘If we have a conservancy, we will continue to fire the grassland. The wildlife flock to where we have set fires. After the rain comes those areas have the best young grass.’ I once asked a Mursi if, during the famous rinderpest epidemic of the 1890’s when they lost all their cattle, the Mursi

A fire-burned landscape in Mursiland (credit: W. Hurd)

stopped setting fires? 'Why would they do that?' he replied. 'Wildlife are our cows too. They need the new grass.'

Halfway through the trip the Mursi had already seen herds of elephant, buffalo, wildebeest, giraffe, and many other species of wildlife. They saw tourist bungalows bringing in 350 US dollars (USD) per night. They heard from one community how they now have a car. 'People used to just die in the bush when they got sick,' they said. 'The hospital was too far. Now they can be saved.' The Mursi decided there and then to start a conservancy of their own.

We went to the Maasai community conservancy Il Ngwesi. This was the oldest CCA, having been in existence since 1996. The Maasai said, 'You Mursi are a people that know how to milk cows, but do you know how to milk an elephant?' The Maasai told the Mursi that starting up their own CCA would be difficult, but they must 'be a wooden club', the community must be as one. This phrase, *te holcum*, has become popular among Mursi. It was precisely because the Mursi were talking to other pastoralists, who had just as deep a love of cattle as they did, that they took to the idea of community conservation.

Left to right. A Mursi warrior adorns his face with white clay; a man dances at a large celebration (credit: T. Clack)

A Mursi wears the peritoneum of the sacrificed black ox in the meeting to declare the Mursi CCA (credit: W. Hurd)

On return, the trip took on mythical proportions. The Mursi were convinced that they had indeed found the *Mun a Bar Huli*. The Mursi decided, without outside suggestion, to call a meeting of all Mursi provinces to pitch the idea of a CCA to the greater community. On 11 May 2009, about 300 Mursi gathered. I was thrust into a group of Mursi who were marching, singing, and shooting guns into the air as they arrived at the meeting ground. As we reached the black ox that had been sacrificed to show that this meeting was of particular

Mursi scrutinize a map of their territory to plan scout routes (credit: W. Hurd)

importance, one man kneeled down, placed his hand on the head of the ox and sobbed ceremonially. The debate that followed focused on what was learned in Kenya and what a conservancy was. There was virtually no opposition to the idea that the Mursi should have a community conservation area of their own. One leader described the trip to Kenya, metaphorically, as a 'raid', in which *zininya a wush*, four thieves, had gone to 'steal' the idea of the CCA and had brought it back to the Mursi. The idea received overwhelming acceptance at the meeting and a hunting ban went into immediate effect.

The community conservancy began in earnest. Mursi scouts were hired from different Mursi provinces, sites for tourist camps were selected, and a Mursi team started collecting entrance fees to the CCA. This was supported through a grant from First People's Worldwide to Mursi Indigenous Community Association. After two years, the Mursi reported increases in wildlife, especially buffalo, giraffe, and Defassa waterbuck. They spread the idea to the Bodi and the Suri who both want CCAs. They received a 100,000 USD grant from CORDAID, contingent on government approval. The Mursi doggedly pursued recognition from the Ethiopian Government. Although there was support from Southern Region (SNNPR) Culture and Tourism

Bureau and the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority, ultimately the Mursi were told that the Ethiopian Government prioritized sugarcane plantation development in the region over a CCA.

Ten years on from the original Kenya visit, a section of the Mursi population still holds out hope of a CCA. The scouts ask to be put back to work and a small core is still searching for ways to make it work. Without benefit coming from wildlife conservation, the Mursi have returned to their previous hunting regime. Wildlife provides much needed food and skins that the women and children wear for clothing.

The livelihood pattern changes brought about by the loss of the Omo River floods, because of the Gibe III Dam, have left a section of Mursiland sadly underused. This area is also the southern part of the Tama Wildlife Reserve, which was originally proposed for a Mursi CCA. The Mursi would like to see it as a Community Wildlife Conservation Area as defined in Federal Wildlife Regulation 163/2008, which states that 'local communities shall administer and develop community conservation areas'. This area could have its utility increased by also providing tourism revenue for the community during these times of unstable livelihood. The Mursi have a dream that, through running their own community conservation area, *bogimo kagar*, 'Our poverty will be gone'.

Talks continue on for a Mursi CCA. The sugarcane plantations have been established, but there is still room for a CCA. Lion sightings are common, and elephants roam in southern Mursiland. The tourism demand is large in Mursi. The mixture of community economic need, community enthusiasm, wildlife, and tourism demand, make this, potentially, one of the most exciting wildlife conservation initiatives in Ethiopia.

Early on in the life of the CCA, I had the opportunity to talk with Garth Owen-Smith, who founded Namibia's ground breaking CCA program. The program now covers 17% of the country. I lamented then that we hadn't succeeded in obtaining approval for the CCA in four years of work.

'Four years? That's nothing', he said. 'It took us more than 20 year to establish the first Namibian CCA'. Our hopes for a Mursi CCA continue.

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25. From Marginalization to Megadam Crisis: The Dasanech and their Northern Turkana Neighbours

Claudia Carr

The Dasanech and northern Turkana are pastoral peoples long residing in adjacent lands within the borderlands of Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia—including the contested Ilemi Triangle. Although they share many features of pastoral life, the Dasanech and Turkana are distinct in language origin (Cushitic vs. Nilotic) and social organization—differences that contribute to their frequent shifts between friendly and hostile relations and their competition for the region's resources. Environmental change, underpinned by decades of state policies and interventions, has transformed negatively the lives of these groups and threaten further damage.

The Dasanech and northern Turkana inhabit vast semi-arid plains of the borderlands of Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia which are punctuated by the Omo River which begins in the Ethiopian highlands and flows to its terminus at Kenya's Lake Turkana where it contributes more than 95% of the lake's water. Environmental variations throughout river and lake, rangelands, scattered volcanic highlands and small unique localities provide a diversity of resources vital for Dasanech and Turkana life.

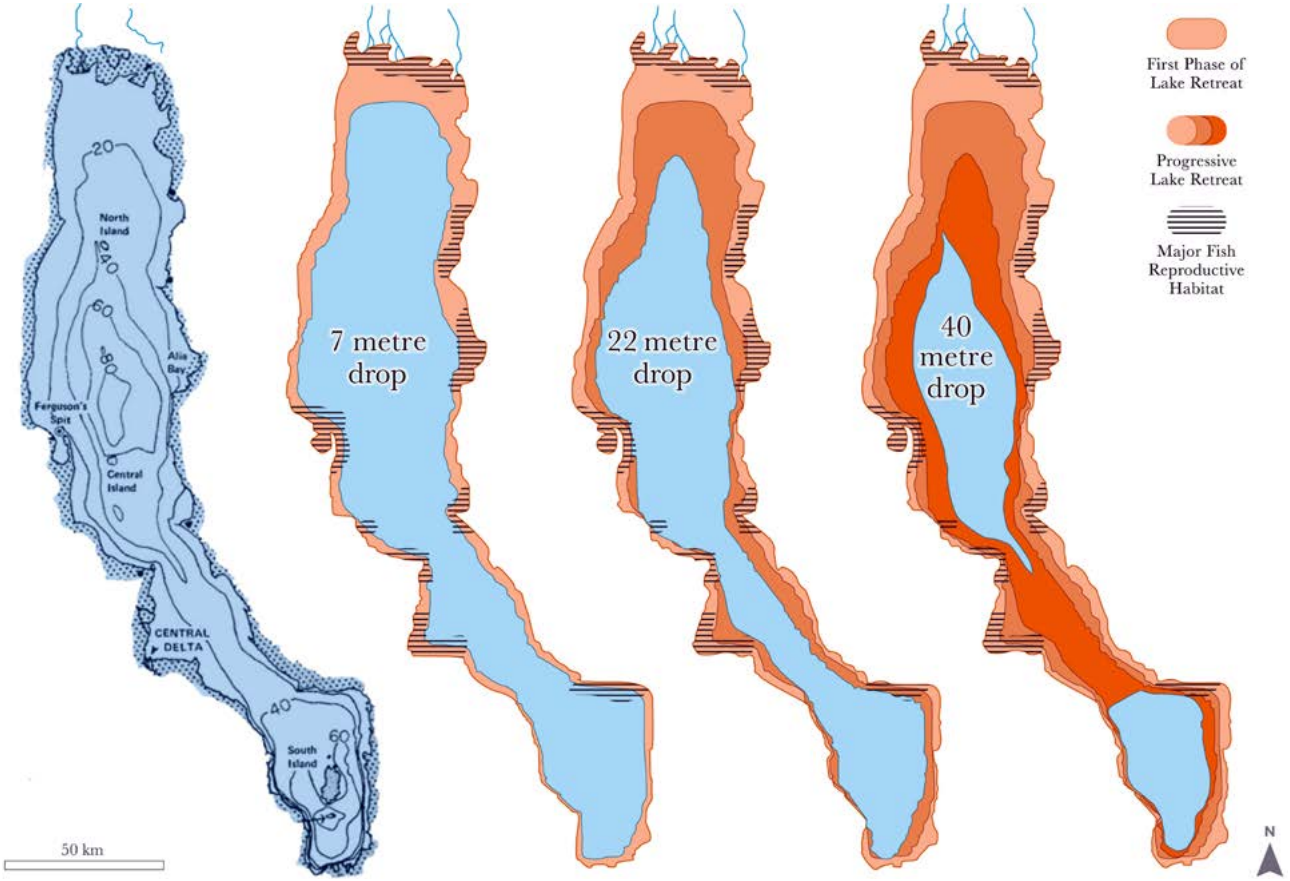
Dasanech society has long absorbed fragments of neighbouring ethnic groups as part of a complex process of social fusion and fission. There are today eight Dasanech social segments with widely varying degrees of linkages among them. By the early twentieth century, Dasanech pastoralists ranged broadly across borderland pastures and had begun utilizing lands along the lowermost Omo River, both for seasonal livestock grazing and watering and for agriculture following the river's annual flood.

At the core of Dasanech pastoral life is a set of survival strategies rooted in centuries of traditional knowledge and highly adaptive for coping with shifting environmental and social conditions, including prolonged droughts, disease epidemics, disruption of trade relations and interethnic conflict. Foremost among these strategies are: (1) maximum accumulation of livestock, particularly cattle, with various means of 'offtake'; (2) high mobility of livestock and human settlements, with flexible seasonal patterns; (3) diversification of herds to cattle, goats, sheep and donkeys - suited to different pasturage, water and disease conditions; (4) livelihood diversification extending to flood dependent cultivation along the river, wild food gathering, hunting and fishing; (5) extensive social reciprocity relations regarding livestock, material goods and social exchange - often redistributive in character; and (6) complex exchange relations with multiple ethnic groups in the broader region.

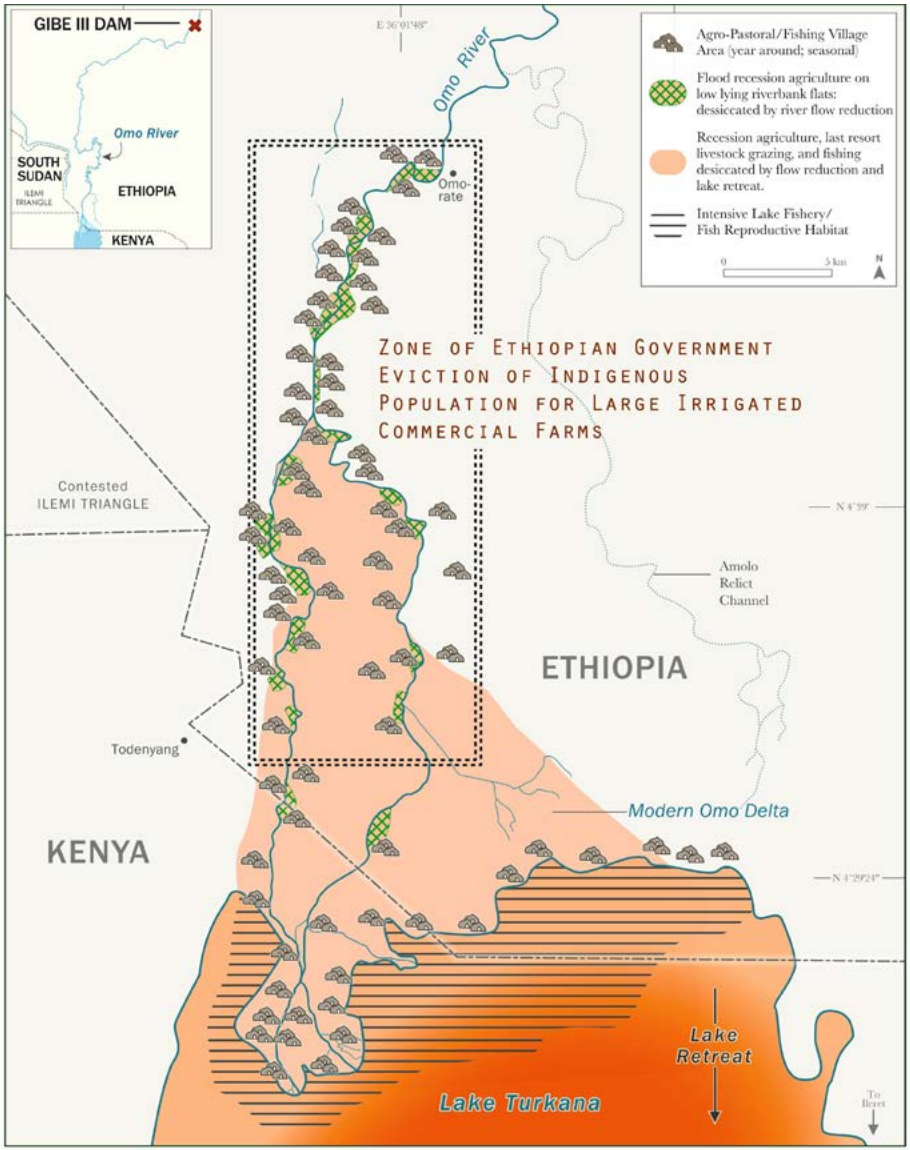
Successful implementation of these strategies requires access to sufficient territory for land and water resources. Dasanech pastoralists, however, experienced major cuts in such access by the middle decades of

Pastoral Dasanech (top left, right), mixed pastoral and food dependent agriculture at the Omo River (bottom left), and riverside flood agriculture (bottom right) (credit: C. Carr)

the last century. Kenyan colonial and post-colonial policies and those of the Ethiopian monarchy severely impacted the pastoralists, including by redrawing national boundaries and forcing the Dasanech to abandon large areas they had traditionally utilized. These areas included lands east and west of Kenya's Lake Turkana and the more pristine grasslands of the Ilemi Triangle which was designated a 'no go' zone. As a result, livestock and villagers were crowded into a small portion of Ethiopia's extreme southwest, causing widespread ecological deterioration, major livestock mortality and herd decline, and widespread hunger among the Dasanech. The crisis was heightened by a series of extreme drought periods.



Progressive retreat of Lake Turkana caused by the Gibe III dam and dam-enabled, irrigated agricultural plantations (credit: C. Carr and Springer Publishing)



Progressive desiccation of modern Omo delta and northern end of Lake Turkana from Omo River flow reduction by Gibe III dam and irrigated plantations (credit: C. Carr and Springer Publishing)

Facing such adverse conditions, Dasanech survival strategies required major shifts in livelihood. Increasing numbers of villagers moved to the Omo River for planting on annually flooded river flats, livestock grazing and fishing. By the beginning of this century, a majority of villagers had settled at or near the Omo River, including in delta lands. The Dasanech were thus highly vulnerable to any major change in the Omo's flow, especially the lack of annual flooding.

Ethiopia's completion of the Gibe III dam – Africa's largest dam to date and one of the world's tallest - initiated devastation not only for the Dasanech but also for their Turkana neighbours around the lake. The dam has radically reduced the Omo's downstream flow and eliminated its annual flood which brought fresh water, sediment and nutrients critical for Dasanech agriculture, riverside pastures and fish habitat. Major reduction in river flow initiated the process of shrinking the lake's waters, especially in the shallow waters of the Omo delta, northern and lateral shorelines with predictable future retreat.

The crisis caused by reduced Omo flow and cessation of its annual flood is compounded by expropriation of thousands of Dasanech villagers from their riverine lands to make way for dam-enabled, irrigated commercial plantations. These land grabs amount to tens of thousands of hectares along the lowermost Omo. Contrary to assertions by the Ethiopian government and the dam's key international aid proponents, the World Bank and the African Development Bank, that the Gibe III is necessary to control 'excessive flooding' that is 'destructive of livestock and human life', Dasanech and Turkana elders uniformly deny any such destruction, with the added assertion that they have long needed more flood, not less. Satellite data confirm the statements by the local residents.

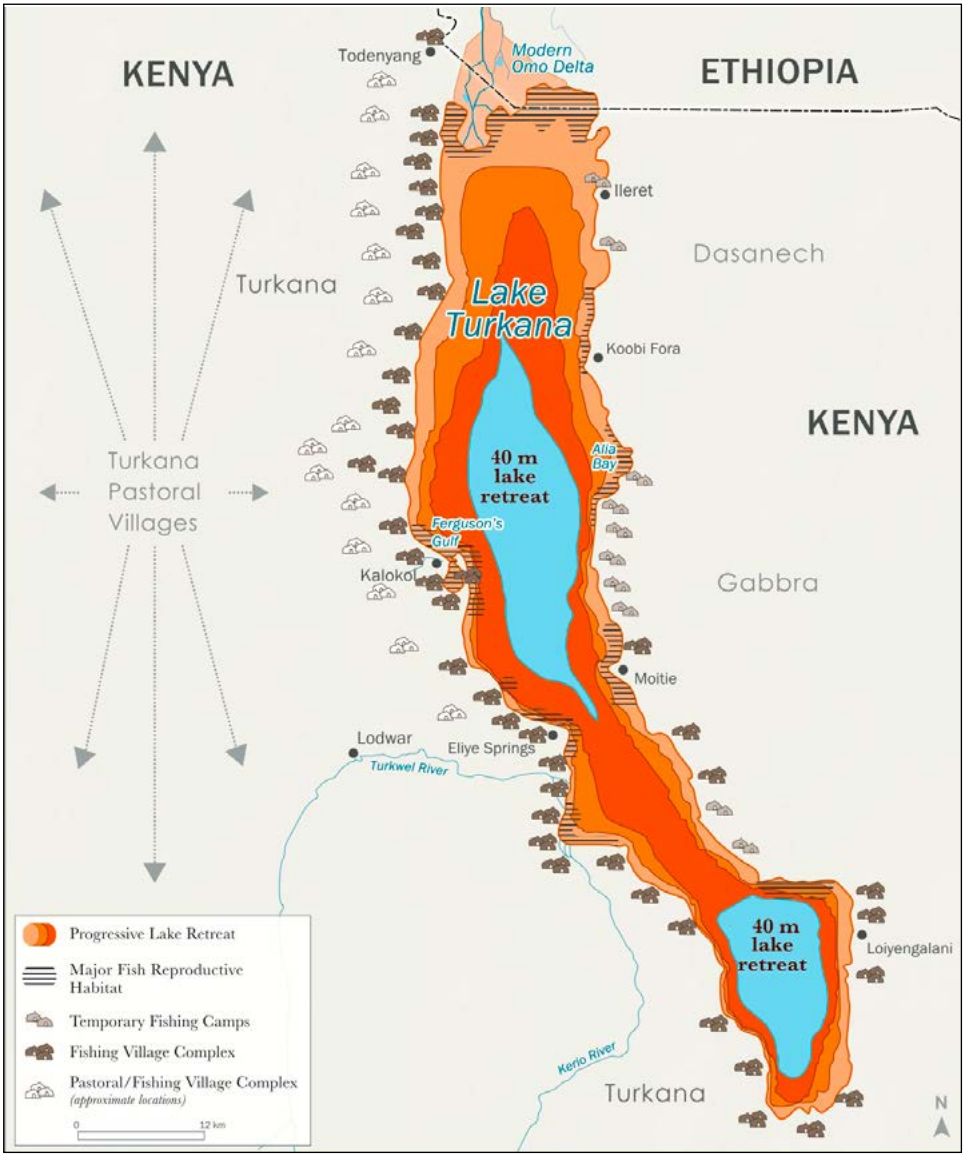
Despite government prohibition of independent observers in the Dasanech area of the lowermost Omo basin, residents continually describe the radical reduction in Omo flow, the cessation of annual flood, causing desiccation of their flood dependent pastures, agricultural lands and fish habitat throughout the modern delta. Villagers report devastating livestock losses, failure of crops and plummeting fish catch. Many livestock owners now send their few remaining animals westward to stock camps in search of grazing. However, conflicts with the Turkana and Nyangatom competing for vanishing pastures in those lands, have been intensifying.

Accounts by Dasanech villagers and health workers in the Kenyan border area consistently describe widespread malnutrition and disease, particularly malaria, throughout Dasanech settlement areas. These accounts also describe significant occurrence of cholera.

The northern Turkana pastoralists have long resided in the vast plains west of Lake Turkana. Their survival strategies are similar to those of the Dasanech, although without a substantial agricultural option. Since the lake's high salinity precludes planting along its perimeter and area rainfall is insufficient for crops, major livelihood shifts for the northern Turkana have been mostly related to fishing.

Northern Turkana. Fishing community members with locally crafted sailboats on Lake Turkana (top left, right; bottom left); pastoralists in dryland plains near Ilemi Triangle (bottom right) (credit: C. Carr)

Like their Dasanech neighbours, these Turkana have been subject to extreme marginalization dating from the early twentieth century, primarily due to policies by the colonial and postcolonial Kenyan government, together with those of Ethiopia. These processes have included major territorial restriction by the Kenyan and Ethiopian governments. Key among these restrictions are those from valuable pasturelands in the Omo River delta region, from foothill locales along their western border, and from the Ilemi Triangle designated as a 'no go' zone (until recently). The Kenyan colonial government carried out major taxation as well as harshly imposed seizures of livestock, often as reprisal for Turkana resistance to subjugation. These actions



Projection of Lake Turkana's retreat from Gibe III and dam-linked irrigated plantations on the Omo River, with locations of vulnerable Turkana fishing and fishing/pastoral villages (credit: C. Carr and Springer Publishing)

led to major herd losses, with Turkana traditional recovery strategies no longer effective. Their situation was greatly worsened by the occurrence of nearly unprecedented extended drought periods.

As a consequence, thousands of pastoral northern Turkana households, even entire village groups, began migrating to the western shores of Lake Turkana. Many of them learned to fish from earlier migrants and both fishing and fishing/pastoral villages increasingly populated the western shores of Lake Turkana. While Turkana pastoralists had long trekked with their livestock (cattle, goats, sheep, and camels) to the lake for temporary watering and grazing, increasing numbers of them became semi-permanent residents there. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, hundreds of thousands of pastoral and fishing Turkana had become fully dependent on Lake Turkana for survival. The highest concentration of settlements formed around Ferguson's Gulf and Kalokol town, with lakeside villages extending to Kenya's border with Ethiopia.

Despite their rich knowledge of the lake's fishery and its habitats, Turkana fishing communities are extremely vulnerable to the radical decline of Omo inflow to the lake and its annual 'pulse' of fresh water and nutrients. They now confront the destruction of their shoreline environments where fish reproduction habitats for most of the fish species essential to them are located. Conflicts between the Dasanech and Turkana over vanishing fish stocks, mostly unreported outside of the local area, are violent and intensifying.

A major survival crisis is now underway. In a recent survey of lakeside villages in late 2017, local chiefs and fishermen detailed catastrophic level decreases in fish catch, along with major increases in malnutrition and disease, including malaria. Health workers from Kalokol to the Ethiopian border also reported cholera occurrence in multiple locations.

Like the Dasanech along the lowermost Omo, the northern Turkana communities around Lake Turkana have no realistic options for coping with the crisis unfolding. Mostly omitted in Kenya's last census, these Turkana describe their situation as 'you will find our bones in the desert'. The Kenyan government remains in denial of these dire conditions.

The governments of Ethiopia and Kenya, along with the international development banks shaping and promoting the developments underway, have unquestionably violated United Nations recognized Human Rights - to water, to human health and to livelihood - in their treatment of the Dasanech and northern Turkana. Already, these violations have produced tragic consequences for both peoples.

Although the Gibe III dam is primarily responsible for the crisis facing the Dasanech and northern Turkana, there is also severe threat from oil exploration in the lowermost Omo basin, the Ilemi Triangle and the Lake Turkana region. Contrary to official statements, exploration in the borderlands has been underway for decades, with clear knowledge of reserves. Oil development there would cause additional territorial

restrictions, major drilling water abstraction from the Omo River and Lake Turkana, pollution problems and further militarization of the region.

Further Reading

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Production of ceramic cattle figurines (credit: Mursiland Heritage Project)

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