

© Department of Social Anthropology,
The Queen's University of Belfast 1979.

ISBN 0 85389 172 9

General Editor: John Blacking

Editorial Board:

<i>Reginald Byron</i>	<i>Joyce Pettigrew</i>
<i>Ladislav Holy</i>	<i>David Riches</i>
<i>May McCann</i>	<i>Milan Stuchlik</i>
<i>Kay Milton</i>	<i>David Wilson</i>

PRINTED BY

W. & G. BAIRD LTD, GREYSTONE PRESS ANTRIM

Segmentary Lineage Systems Reconsidered

Edited by

Ladislav Holy

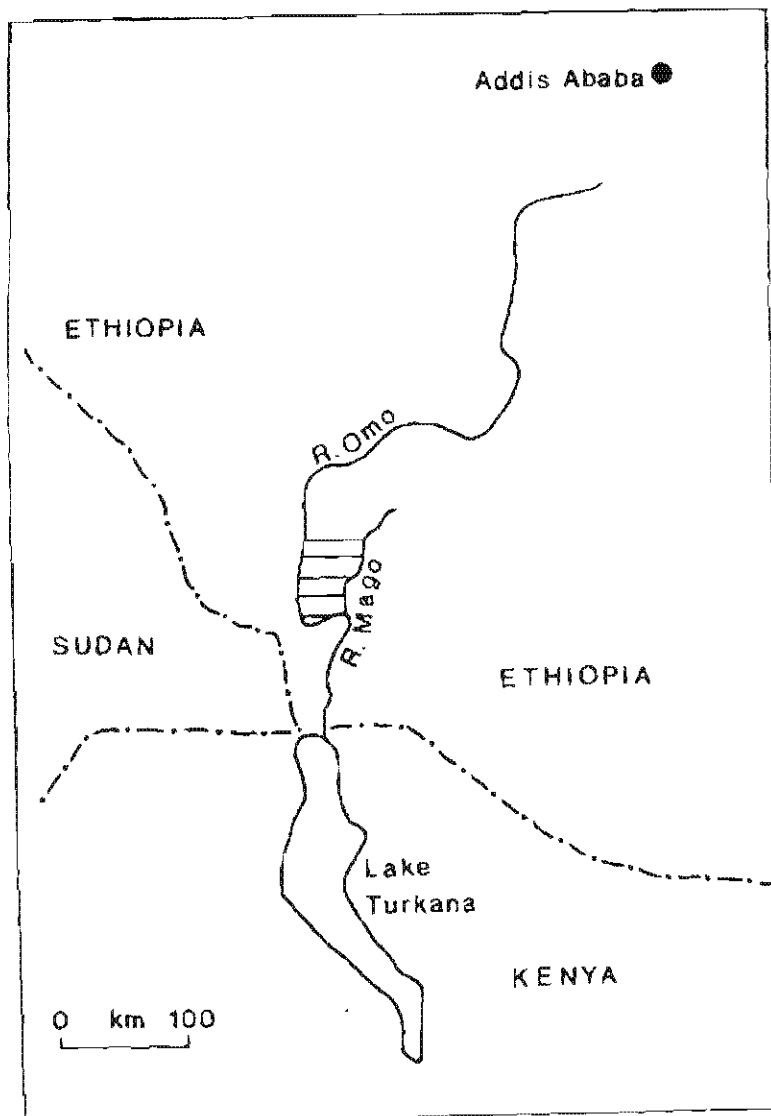
A Journey Made Them: Territorial Segmentation and Ethnic Identity among the Mursi

David Turton

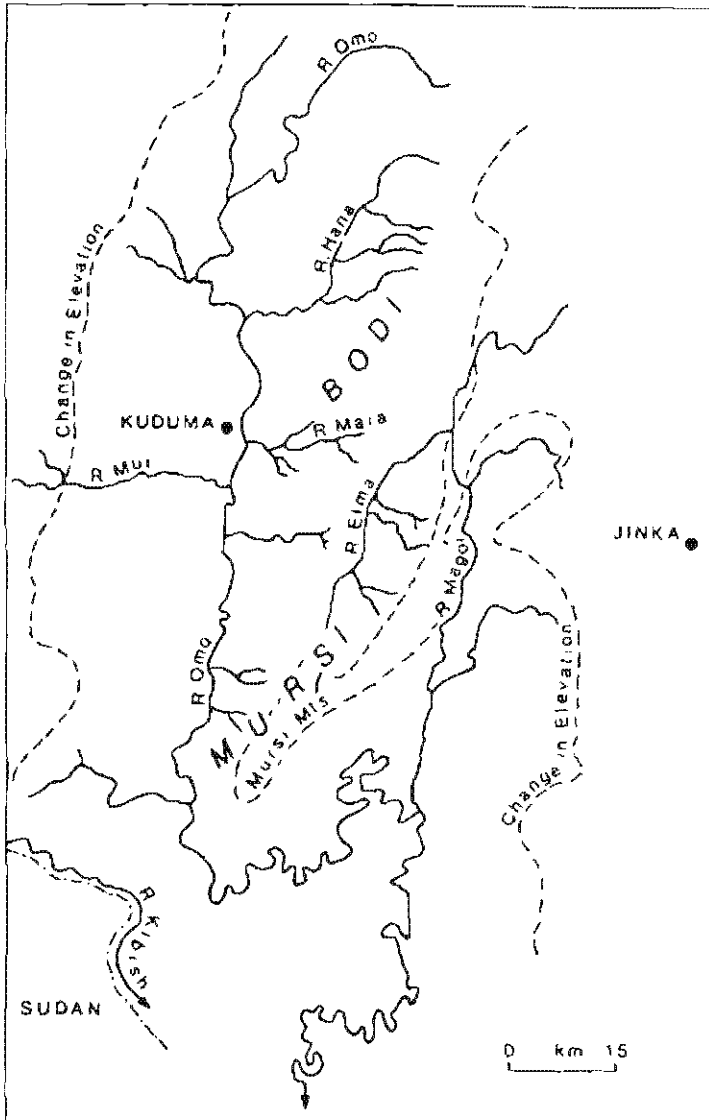
Introduction

In a well known article, Sahlins (1961) has claimed that the essential feature of segmentary lineage systems is that they are 'organizations of predatory expansion'. They represent an adaptation to a particular set of circumstances in the evolution of 'tribal' society – namely, the need to expand into an already occupied 'ecological niche'. Taking the Tiv and the Nuer as his two ethnographic examples, he argues persuasively that these groups have been able to expand at the expense of their neighbours because of the organizational advantages bestowed upon them by their segmentary lineages. Putting it another way, it follows that the internal organization of these groups is a function of their external relations and that they cannot therefore be understood if they are treated as self-contained and autonomous units. In this article I want to follow a similar line of argument in looking at a case of 'expansion' which offers many points of comparison with the Nuer-Dinka case discussed by Sahlins, but where lineality or 'local genealogical segmentation' (Sahlins' phrase) is not present. From the point of view of the theme of this book, therefore, I am offering a 'negative case', the significance of which, however, for the 'reconsideration' of segmentary lineage systems will, I hope, become apparent as the argument proceeds.

Let me begin by outlining the problem. Living next door to each other along the east bank of the River Omo, in southwestern Ethiopia, are two small groups of cattle herders-cum-cultivators, the Mursi, numbering between four and five thousand, and the Bodi, numbering between three and four thousand (Maps I and II). Although closely related, culturally and economically, they engage in periodic wars which appear to be decided, consistently, in favour of the Mursi who, it is agreed by both sides, are encroaching on territory formerly occupied or claimed by the Bodi. An inevitable question, to which there is no obvious answer, poses itself: What is the secret of Mursi success? It is true that they outnumber the Bodi, but the military tactics used by both sides – 'hit-and-run' missions by small raiding parties – are such that numerical superiority, at least of the kind that the Mursi enjoy over the Bodi, is of no particular advantage. It cannot be said that the Mursi are more 'warlike' than the Bodi, even in their own estimation. Indeed they like to present themselves as a peace-loving people, surrounded by ferocious and bloodthirsty neighbours, and are particularly respectful of what they see as the doggedness and determination of the Bodi fighting



Map I
The Location of Mursi Country



Map II
Mursi and Bodi Country

spirit. There appear to be no differences in the territorial and political organizations of the two groups which could account for the ability of the Mursi to 'expand' at the expense of the Bodi. Neither group has a segmentary lineage system. Nor is there a difference in ecology which could give the Mursi an 'organizational superiority' in raiding, along the lines argued by Glickman for the Nuer (1972). Both groups inhabit more or less identical territories which they exploit by means of the same subsistence activities and transhumance movements.

In what follows I seek to show, firstly, that Mursi movement into Bodi territory is a matter of the same kind of 'political consolidation' through the 'massing' of otherwise opposed segments that Sahlins saw as 'unique' to segmentary lineage systems of the Tiv-Nuer type (1961). This does not explain, of course, how the Mursi have been able to 'expand' at the expense of the Bodi, since Bodi territorial organization shows the same capacity for the 'massing' of segments. But my second aim will be to show that the question 'What is the secret of Mursi success?' is misplaced, because it wrongly assumes that there is some explanation to be found within Mursi society itself – indeed, that there *is* such a thing as 'Mursi society', in anything but a relative and transitory sense. It is not so much that the Mursi are *expanding*, I argue, as that they *are* expansion. To put it another way, they are a temporary coalescence in a movement of population which goes far beyond them in both space and time. The argument hinges on an analysis of the segmentary territorial system of the Mursi. Before describing this system, however, it is necessary to set out the main facts of their subsistence, transhumance and settlement, which I do in the next section.¹

Subsistence, Transhumance and Settlement

Mursi country is in the shape of an oblong, about eighty kilometres long by about thirty kilometres wide, and it is clearly bounded on three sides by geographical features. To the west and south it is bordered by the Omo, a river which flows for over 1,000 kilometres from the highlands, southwest of Addis Ababa, to Lake Turkana, and which has a total catchment area of over 70,000 square kilometres. From about May to September it is full, fast and dangerous to cross in the local dugout canoes, while it is at its lowest in December and January, when it can be easily forded at several points in Mursi country. The eastern boundary is formed by the Mago, a tributary of the Omo, while another Omo tributary, the Mara marks the approximate northern limit of Mursi occupation. This is a relatively short seasonal stream, however, which is rarely in spate and which presents no serious obstacle to communications.

The Mursi depend upon three main subsistence activities, which are spatially separated yet closely integrated, in the sense that each one, although insufficient and precarious in itself, makes a vital contribution to the long-term viability of the economy. Flood culti-

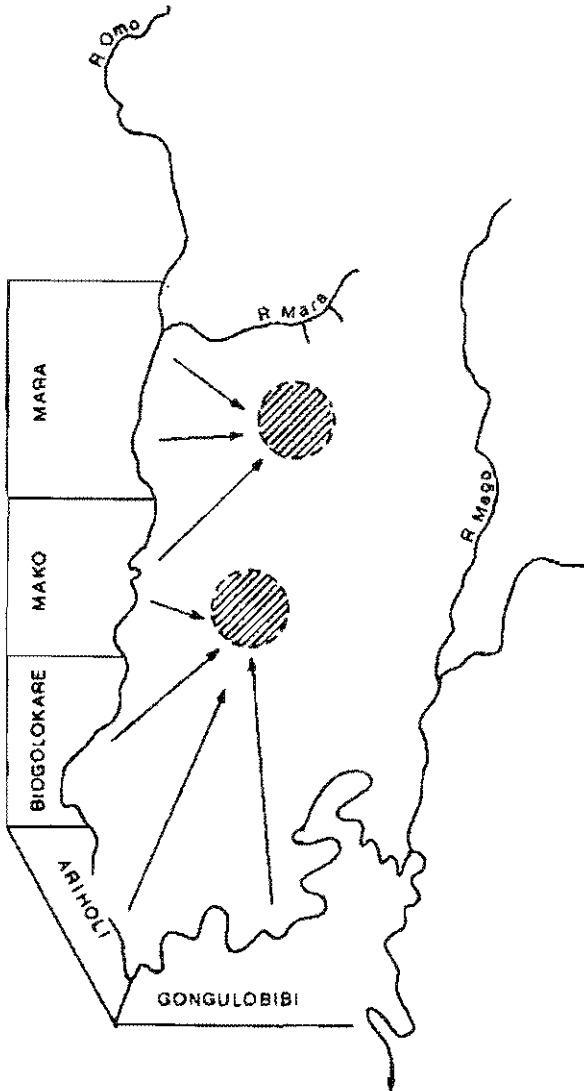
vation takes place along the banks of the Omo between September and February, sorghum and some maize, cow peas, tobacco, gourds and squash being planted along those sections of its banks which were inundated by the August flood. This flooding, which is controlled by the heavy rains which fall over the Ethiopian Plateau between April and September, is limited mainly to silt embankments a few metres in width which have been built up along the banks of the river. The cultivable area is therefore limited, but the annual deposition of flood silts enables the same plots to be cultivated year after year. This is in contrast to the second main subsistence activity of the Mursi, shifting cultivation, which is dependent upon scarce² and, more important, unreliable local rainfall and which takes place in clearings in the bushland thicket³ which borders the east bank of the Omo to a width of up to seven kilometres. Sorghum is planted in clearings in the bushbelt after the onset of the main rains in March or April, and is ready for harvesting in June or July. Crop failures due to lack of rain are frequent, however, occurring perhaps every two or three years. Thus, whereas at the Omo people prepare for cultivation land which is limited in extent but which they know is cultivable (because it has already been flooded), in the bushbelt they may clear large areas which the failure of the rains makes totally useless. The third main subsistence activity of the Mursi is cattle herding, which takes place in the wooded grassland which rises steadily eastwards from the edge of the bushbelt to the Omo-Mago watershed. Although in sentiment and ideology a pastoral people, they have only about one head of cattle per head of human population, which is a good deal less than a quarter of what they would need in order to lead a purely pastoral existence (Brown 1971; Dahl and Hjort, 1976). Having, furthermore, no access to veterinary assistance, their herds suffer heavily both from periodical epidemics of rinderpest and from increasingly severe inroads of sleeping sickness. But although cultivation clearly provides over half their daily subsistence, cattle play a vital part in the economy not only because their milk, blood and meat provide a much needed supplement to grain in the normal diet, but also because they can, if necessary, be sold for grain in the highlands in the event of local crop failures.⁴

The spatial arrangement of the population at any particular time of year reflects the need to span these geographically separate natural resources with the necessary human resources. The result is a form of transhumance which provides for a high degree of individual mobility and which does not allow year-round residence in a single locality by any section of the population. I now describe briefly the seasonally changing settlement pattern to which these movements give rise.

Three zones of settlement can be distinguished: a western zone, along the banks of the Omo, a central zone, between the edge of the bushbelt and the River Elma and an eastern zone between the Elma

and the Omo-Mago watershed. It is only in the central zone, from about March to August, that pastoral and agricultural activities can be carried out by co-resident family units. During these months, settlements, each consisting, on average, of half a dozen contiguous thorn and brushwood cattle compounds, are dotted around the headstreams of the Omo's westward flowing tributaries. Each family unit, consisting of a married man, his wife or wives and unmarried children, has its own compound, into which the family herd is driven at night. These settlements are constructed, ideally, in open country overlooking the bush belt, but within a mile or two's walk of its eastern fringes, so as to be within easy reach of the cultivation areas. They are constructed anew each year, the huts being of a simple 'beehive' type, about five feet tall and covered with grass. Nor do people necessarily re-occupy the same sites in the central zone each year, although they do return to approximately the same areas. The exact distribution of settlements cannot, therefore, be predicted from one year to the next. The 1970 distribution for example, which is shown on Map III, was far more concentrated than it was in the previous year, this concentration being the result of a deterioration in Mursi/Bodi relations, which caused the northern Mursi to withdraw their cattle a good deal further from the cultivation areas along the Mara than they would have liked. Also there had taken place a particularly severe series of raids from the east, launched by the Hamar, with whom, unlike the Bodi, the Mursi are permanently at war. Mursi response to the sustained threat from Hamar cattle raiders is to group their settlements close together, so as to enable a pursuit party to be raised as quickly as possible after a raid. In the absence of such external pressures then, settlements are distributed over a wider area of the central zone, although I think the concentration into a northern and a southern area of settlement would remain visible, if less dramatically so, even under 'normal' conditions.

The central zone settlements are abandoned around September, when it is time to begin preparations for planting at the Omo. The cattle, however, cannot be taken to the Omo since there is no - or very little - grazing to be found in the bushbelt, which is anyway infested with tsetse flies. On the other hand, by September, water and grazing are scarce in the central zone so, while the women, girls and some men make for the Omo, to begin planting, the cattle are taken by the remaining men and boys in the opposite direction, into the more favoured eastern zone. Here, between about September and March, men live in rough cattle camps, are constantly on the move and, especially at the driest time of the year (December - January), when the Mago is easily fordable, constantly on the alert for cattle raiders. Meanwhile at the Omo, the population, consisting predominantly of women, girls and children, lives in relatively well-built huts, on permanent sites associated with small parcels of flood land along the length of the river, and in safety from raiders.



Map III
Central Zone Settlement, 1970,
and Territorial Sections

With the onset of the rains, in March or April, these two sections of the population come together, in the central zone, until the Omo rises and falls again in September. Mursi transhumance, then, consists of a process of dispersal from (in August/September) and convergence on (in March/April) a central zone in which agricultural and pastoral activities can be carried on in sufficiently close proximity to enable families to be united for about half the year.

Territorial segmentation

Like the Nuer, the Mursi distinguish, terminologically, between a settlement, (that is, a physical structure) and the group of people who live there. The word for a settlement is *or* (plural: *ori*), while its residents form a *buran* (plural: *buranyoga*). Both terms may have a much wider extension than this. The whole of Mursi country may be thought of, metaphorically, as a single settlement, and the whole Mursi population as a single *buran*, or group of co-residents. Between these two extremes lie a number of segmentary levels which permanently divide the population into separate units on a territorial basis. This does not apply to the residents of a single settlement, since at this level residence pattern is extremely impermanent – those found living together and herding their cattle together in one year may well be found living apart in the next. The lowest order of segmentation is based upon the one relatively fixed subsistence resource of the Mursi – flood land at the Omo. Access to this valuable but limited resource is more strictly governed by rules than is access to bushbelt cultivation or to pastoral resources, and people habitually return to the same sites along the Omo, year after year. Thus, the territorial 'base' which serves to identify a person permanently with the smallest number of others is at the Omo, and the Omo cultivation sites are therefore foci of territorial differentiation.

People who cultivate at the same place along the Omo form a *buran*, which is usually named after this place, and those who share the same central zone settlement often cultivate at the same site along the Omo. In general, people who cultivate at the same or nearby sites at the Omo will occupy the same or nearby settlements in the central zone. A higher order segment is formed by people who cultivate different but contiguous Omo sites, and at this level we reach a division of the Mursi population into five main segments (*buranyoga*) which can be shown on the map with fair accuracy by marking off appropriate stretches of the Omo. These segments, which for convenience I call territorial sections, are, from north to south, Mara (a river), Mako (a river), Biogolokare (red-eyed cattle), Ariholi (white ox) and Gongulobibi (big boats). There is a further order of segmentation, below the all-inclusive Mursi grouping, for the three northern sections together form a named higher order segment, called Dola. People of the three northern sections think of themselves, in certain contexts, as a unit, in opposition to the two southern sections. But Ariholi and Gongulobibi are not

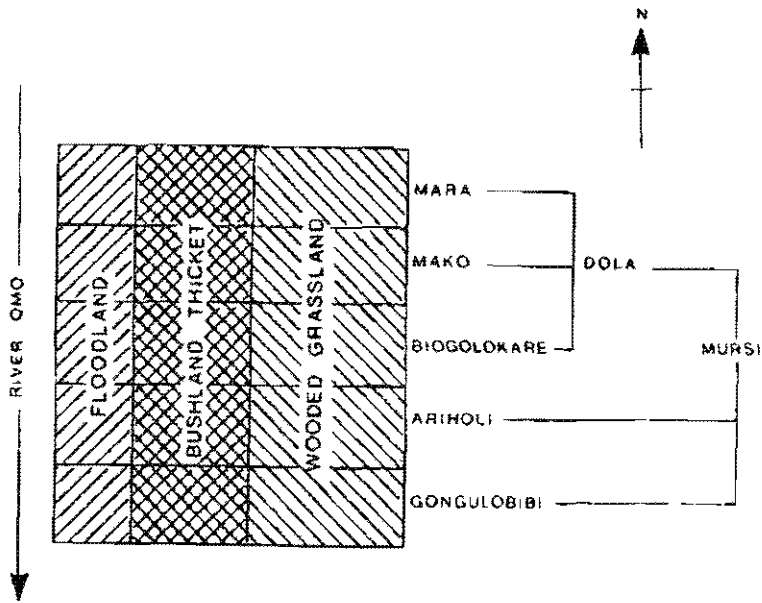
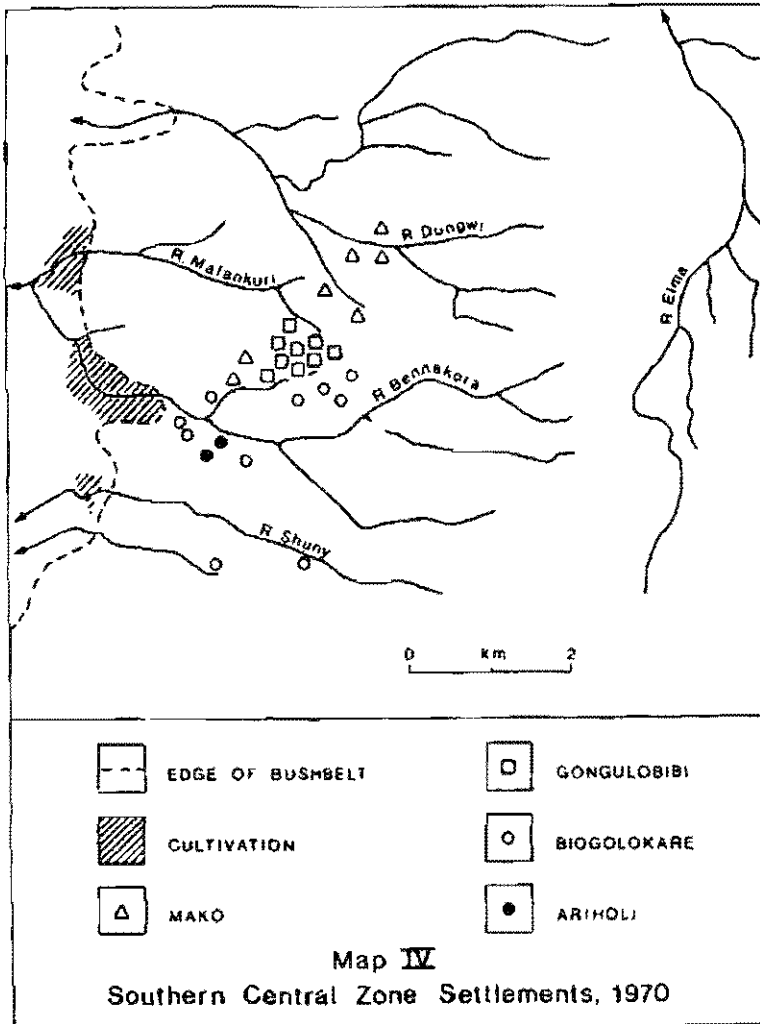


Fig. 1 Schematic Representation of Territorial Sections Cutting Across the 'Grain' of Natural Resources.

similarly linked by a common name and each is, in some senses, the structural equivalent of Dola. (See Map III and Figure 1)

Although there is a clear tendency for the central zone settlements of a particular section to form a distinct grouping (see for example the 1970 distribution pattern of southern central zone settlements, shown on Map IV) it is only possible to indicate the geographical extent of sections at the Omo, the territorial 'baseline' of Mursi society. Also, it is clear from Map III that the division of central zone settlements into two separate groupings does not necessarily mirror the division between the three Dola sections on the one hand and the two southern sections on the other. In particular, members of the Biogolokare section are at least as closely associated, in terms of day to day contacts, economic co-operation and public life, with members of Ariholi and Gongulobibi as they are with their fellow Dola members to the north. The division into sections, then, is a structural division between people and not a geographical division of the territory they occupy. This structural division is defined by the Mursi by means of an institution which I call ceremonial duelling (*thagine*), in which the weapon is a pole, about six feet long and weighing about two lbs. Contests are held two or three times a year and on an especially large scale following the bushbelt harvest in June-July.



Contestants in duelling are always unmarried men and they always come from different sections. How should the latter rule be interpreted? Does it reflect 'latent antagonism' between sections, for which duelling is a kind of safety valve? It would be difficult to argue this because, firstly, rights to property and resources are not vested in sections. Secondly, the more or less intense build-up of tension and hostility between the young men of different sections which precedes ceremonial duelling appears to be largely manufactured for the occasion. Thirdly, such an argument would make it difficult to explain why only unmarried men take part in the duel-

ling. Another interpretation of the rule in question might be that it is simply a convenient way of picking sides. The trouble with this, however, is that there is no obvious reason why 'sides' need to be picked at all, since duelling, from almost every angle is a highly individualistic sport. Firstly, the actual bout sets one individual in single combat, against another. Secondly, there is no points system, or matching of local champions, which would enable one section to 'beat' another. Indeed, it is very unusual for unambiguous superiority to be demonstrated by one contestant during a single bout. For superiority can only be demonstrated by knocking over one's opponent which, since bouts usually last less than thirty seconds, is a very rare occurrence. The duelling careers of some individuals are, of course, more illustrious than those of others and very considerable individual reputations may be made in this way. But they are specifically individual reputations, the men in question sometimes being remembered for many years after their deaths. Thirdly, the main conscious motive for taking part in duelling is sexual assertiveness: the young men say that they do it to impress the unmarried girls. But from this point of view it is more important to take part than to demonstrate superior skill. Indeed it is at least as honourable to sustain injuries as it is to inflict them. Contestants are proud of their injuries and will often leave the binding on an injured limb long after it has ceased to be necessary.

It seems, then, that rather than see the existence of the rule as logically dependant on the existence of the sections, one should look at it the other way round, and use the rule to account for the distinctiveness of sections. A territorial section can then be seen as a local division of the population, the members of which do not oppose each other in ceremonial duelling contest and this is, indeed, how the Mursi see it. The rule itself, then, embodies a structural principle, and this is particularly evident when one considers how it applies to the constituent sections of Dola. For, while the members of these sections may oppose each other in ceremonial duelling contests (this being, in a sense, what makes them sections), they do so only when these contests do not involve the members of non-Dola sections. In October 1969, for example, the unmarried men of the Mara section took part in a day of duelling with the unmarried men of the Mako section, at the latter's 'home ground', these being the only two sections represented. In June 1970 duelling contests took place at the ground of the Biogolokare section, after an outbreak of what could appropriately be called, in a phrase used by Spencer of the Samburu Moran, 'gang warfare', between the young men of Biogolokare on the one hand and those of Ariholi and Gogulobibi on the other. The ensuing contests, which took place just after a good harvest, and which lasted for eight successive days, attracted participants from both the Mara and Mako sections. Dola members, however, did not oppose each other in the contests, and neither did members of Ariholi and Gogulobibi.

There is another ceremonial performance in which the unity of the component sections of Dola is manifested but in which this unity is opposed not to Ariholi and Gogulobibi in combination, but to each of these, individually. This performance is part of the same institutional complex as duelling, since it is that by which local groups of unmarried men become jural adults. I call it, therefore, initiation. Different initiation ceremonies are held in different parts of the country by different sections at intervals of ten to twenty years. The ceremonies are held in the same year according to a fixed order. The Ariholi section holds its ceremony first, and is followed by the Gogulobibi section. The constituent sections of Dola then hold, together, a third and final ceremony. The special conceptual unity of the sections which make up Dola is revealed, then, by this rule, as it is by the rule that members of Dola sections do not oppose each other in duelling contests in which members of the other two sections take part. But whereas the latter rule implies that Ariholi and Gogulobibi are each the structural equivalents of each of the three northern sections (Fig. 2(a)) the former implies that they are each the structural equivalents of Dola (Fig. 2(b)).

Northward Movement

The Mursi explanation of these facts is that Dola was originally a single section, the population of which grew in size and spread northwards, pushing back the Bodi in the process. The trouble with this explanation, from the point of view of the outside observer, is that it raises at least two further questions which it is extremely difficult to know how to answer except in terms of historical accident. Firstly why did the original Dola section suffer a population explosion, and secondly what is the secret of Mursi military superiority over the Bodi? These questions arise from the concept of expansion, according to which a unit, in this case Dola or the Mursi, first exists and then, for whatever reason, proceeds to expand. They do not arise if one thinks in terms, not of the expansion of a particular defined group, but of a population movement which, although manifesting itself here as a northward encroachment of Mursi on Bodi, goes far beyond the two groups in both space and time, and of which, in this wider context, they are each a temporary coalescence. It is this latter view which I adopt here and I begin by considering the relationship between the Mursi and the Bodi.

The Bodi belong to the same language group as the Mursi and share an almost identical environment and economy. Although not mutually intelligible, their languages are closely related⁴ and many people on each side can understand, even if they cannot speak, the other side's language. They do not intermarry, however, and their relations alternate between fairly long periods of peace, lasting from ten to twenty years, and shorter periods of war. When at peace the two groups live virtually cheek by jowl and a great deal of

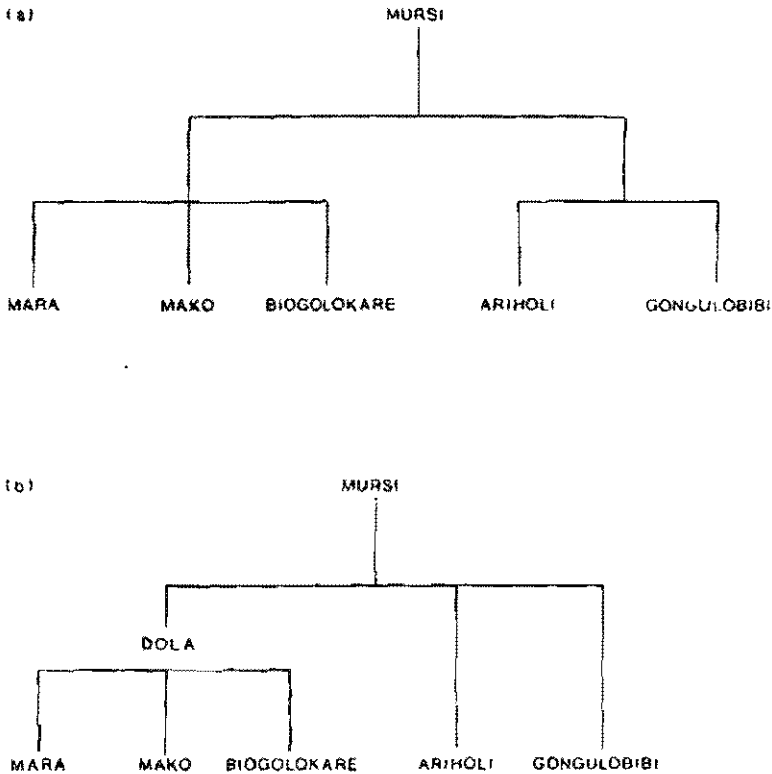


Fig. 2 Two Models of Segmentation.

economic co-operation and mutual visiting takes place between them, while in time of war they are separated by a temporary no-man's land, across which small raiding parties go regularly to and fro. These periods of hostility, which may last three to four years, are brought to an end by peace-making ceremonies, after which friendly relations are resumed between the two groups.

During periods of peace, then, there is much friendly contact between the two groups, most northern Mursi having one or two Bodi associates whom they visit from time to time and from whom they can expect help – such as a gift of sorghum at a time of food shortage. Some Mursi cultivate with their Bodi friends in the latter's cultivation area and may leave their children with them for long periods. It is noticeable and, in the context of the present argument, extremely significant that this peaceful infiltration seems to be largely in one direction only – from Mursi to Bodi. The Mursi seem to be exerting a kind of demographic pressure on the Bodi under the

umbrella of mutually advantageous economic co-operation between individuals. During these periods of peace a *de facto* boundary exists, north of which an occasional Mursi will be found cultivating with a Bodi associate, but south of which there are no Bodi. Then comes a period of war, sparked off by a succession of apparently adventitious incidents, during which there is no friendly contact between individual Mursi and Bodi and each side aims to get the better of, or at least to even the score with, the other by killing as many of their men as possible. But hostilities are prosecuted in such a way that simple numerical superiority is of no military advantage. Small parties, well armed with rifles and ammunition⁶ and having perfect knowledge (from peace-time contact) of the other group's territory, will hide beside a path, for example, and wait to kill a passer-by, or attack a settlement in the early hours, and be well on the way home by daybreak. This kind of 'tit for tat' is almost certain to be evenly balanced, and does not produce a definite result. What it does do, however, is gradually wear down each side, until, weary both with the loss of life and with the difficulties which the need to be constantly on a war footing put in the way of subsistence activities, they are ready to make peace.

Peace-making is accomplished by means of two successive ceremonies, one held by each group, and in each of which a stock animal is killed in the presence of the other group's representatives. What really matters is not whether one side has lost more men than the other, but where these two ceremonies are held since each side is supposed to hold its ceremony in its own territory. Thus, holding a peace-making ceremony at a certain spot may be a way of making (and having acknowledged by the other side's representatives) a claim to *de jure* ownership of territory which was formally owned only in a *de facto* sense. In which case, it may be said that the purpose of the fighting is to bring about a peace-making ceremony, and that the purpose of this ceremony is to give legal ratification to a territorial encroachment which had already taken place, peacefully, before the fighting started. This can be illustrated from recent history.

During my first period of fieldwork in Mursi country (1969-70) the two sides were at peace, and had been since about 1952. By the time of my second visit (1973-4) they were again at war, among the contributing factors to this being the drought and very severe food shortage which began in 1971. At the end of the last Mursi-Bodi war the Mursi killed their beast of peacemaking at a spot about twenty miles south of what had become, by 1970, their *de facto* northern boundary, the River Mara. When I was last in the field and spoke to both sides about the conditions under which they would be prepared to end hostilities, the Bodi, rather optimistically, insisted that the Mursi would have to withdraw both from Mara and from Kuduma, (the most northerly Mursi cultivation site on the Omo) both of which were claimed by the Bodi as their country. The Mursi,

on the other hand, were adamant that any beast they killed by way of peacemaking would be killed at Mara, and this is indeed what happened, after we had left the field, in 1975.⁷

Mursi and Bodi oral history supports the view that, as a result of these alternating periods of peace and war, the Mursi have been pushing northwards at the expense of the Bodi. The Mursi say that they entered their present territory from the west bank of the Omo, having made an anti-clockwise migration from their homeland in the southeast, crossed the Omo at a point in the south of their present territory, and spread out from there onto the wooded grassland between the Omo and the Mago; the main direction of their expansion being, for obvious geographical reasons, northwards. Both sides agree that the Mursi began to cultivate at Kuduma and along the River Mara, their present *de facto* northern boundary, only in living memory and that both areas were formerly occupied by the Bodi. That there has actually been taking place a northward movement of Mursi-speaking people is also indicated by the fact that, though the Mursi still regard the south as the 'stomach', or heart, of their territory, most Mursi are now members of Dola, and most Dola members belong to the Mara section. The population is most numerous, therefore, at what the Mursi see as the perimeter or fringe of their country, in the north.

It was noted earlier that the Mursi think of the three northern sections as having sprung from a single parent section, called Dola, which happened to increase in size. A slight variation on this is proposed here: namely that there has been a general northward migration, the direction of which has been dictated by geographical features and by the availability of natural resources, and which has been exclusively fed neither by the members of a single 'proto section' nor even by the descendants of those Mursi who were the first to cross to the east bank of the Omo. Rather, one must envisage a continuing movement, not only from present day Mursi country, northwards, but also into it from the west. This is where we must broaden our view to include the Chai, neighbours of the Mursi who live west of the Omo and who not only belong to the same language group but whose language is mutually intelligible with Mursi. The two groups intermarry and one often comes across Chai women in Mursi country who have married Mursi men, and Chai men who have married Mursi women and come to live with their wives' people. Thus, just as one finds Mursi living among the Bodi, so one finds Chai living among the Mursi, but whereas intermarriage enables the Chai to infiltrate Mursi country peacefully, Mursi infiltration of Bodi country cannot, in the end, be peaceful. I have never visited the Chai, but I would expect that, just as there is virtually no westward movement of Bodi into Mursi country, so there is virtually no westward movement of Mursi into Chai country. The Mursi have behind them, then, a source of new immigrants, who speak the same language and with whom they intermarry.

while the Bodi have before them the foothills of the Ethiopian Plateau into which they can move only by displacing the sedentary agriculturalists who already live there.

Who are the Mursi?

As a result, I suggest, of a long-term and continuing population movement which shows up here as a northward encroachment by the Mursi on Bodi territory, new Mursi sections, structurally equivalent to the existing ones and cutting across the same three bands of natural resources have been formed. Each new section has maintained with those immediately behind it ideologically closer links that it has with those further to the south, which the Mursi explain by reference to the common parentage of the sections in question. In view of the argument that has been presented above, however, it seems wiser to view this idea of common parentage as the main ideological justification of a link which has a more pragmatic and contemporary basis. This basis, I suggest, consists in the need to hold on to territorial gains and, if possible, to make further ones, in the face of rival claims by the Bodi. Since the habitat into which the Mursi have been moving has been either occupied or contested, it has been necessary to bring maximum pressure to bear at the frontier. It is evident, however, from the strategies and tactics employed in Mursi/Bodi hostilities, that this pressure cannot be a simple matter of military strength. Rather the maintenance of particularly close ideological links between the sections immediately behind the frontier facilitates the northward drift of population and therefore the gradual, peacetime, encroachment on Bodi territory which has been shown to be the main mechanism of Mursi 'expansion'. A subtle, demographic pressure is brought to bear on the frontier by these arrangements, then, not a crude military one.

A second advantage of the special status of the three northern sections is, however, indirectly military, and has to do with the fact that the most highly valued material asset of the Mursi, the cow, is mobile. During periods of hostility, cattle have to be kept as far back from the frontier as possible. The extent of Mursi and Bodi country together is no more than 2,000 square miles and neither side can keep its cattle completely out of the reach of the other's raiding parties. But the further these raiders have to go into enemy territory, the greater the chances of their being overtaken on the way home and any cattle they may have stolen being retrieved. Thus it is the cattle of the Mara section which, on the Mursi side, are most at risk during Mursi/Bodi wars, and at such times these cattle are sent thirty to forty miles south, to be looked after in the territory of the Biogolokare section. It is useful, therefore, for members of Mara and Biogolokare to think of themselves as having more in common with each other than either of them have with their fellow Mursi of the two southern sections, and therefore as having more binding obligations to each other. It is also interesting to note that the

territorial organization of the Bodi mirrors that of the Mursi. There are three Bodi territorial sections, named from south to north, Gura, Hana and Chirim. Gura and Hana are linked though the name Mela, in exactly the same way as the three northern Mursi sections are linked through the name Dola. Members of Mela think of themselves as a unit in opposition to Chirim.⁸

What we seem to have in Dola, then, is an incipient 'society', the territorial span of which is related to the amount of opposition being experienced at the frontier and to the 'fall-back' distance necessary to protect cattle from raiders during periods of hostility. There will be no need for a greater span than is necessary to maintain ground already won and to make further expansion possible – there is no value in unity for its own sake. As the front line advances, links with units now being left behind become more and more tenuous until they amount to no more than a vague memory of common origin. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that these units, when they have been left far enough behind, in time and space, should start expanding on their own account, in the same direction as, and thus at the expense of, their former allies. At some time in the future, then, a 'society' which originated in the unit now known as Dola might find itself encroached on from behind, rather as the Bodi are now being encroached on by the Mursi. Indeed the members of Dola already protect themselves, symbolically, against such an encroachment from the south, using duelling poles rather than rifles. A useful image to represent all this would be a series of waves, seen in elevation, the crest of each wave representing a different society. Over a time span running into hundreds of years these waves are constantly on the move, merging into and out of each other. But when observed over a single generation or so they appear to be stationary – both to the people themselves and to the outside observer. In the context of the wider time span, then, the Bodi represent a wave which is about to break against the beaches of the Ethiopian Plateau, with another, represented by the Mursi (or rather Dola) coming in close behind it.

As already noted, the Mursi and Bodi are the easternmost representatives of a language group (called Didinga-Murle by Tucker and Bryan, 1956) and Surma by Bender (1971) which extends about 200 miles westwards into the southern Sudan. This language group belongs to the Nilo-Saharan (Greenberg, 1963) family which includes Nuer, Dinka and Anuak (see Bender, 1976). The closest cultural and linguistic links of the Mursi are with their nearest neighbours to the west, the Chai, with whom, as has already been noted, they share a common language and intermarry. In terms of environment and economy, as well as geographical distance, the Chai are further removed from the Mursi than are the Bodi. They live in the higher country west of the Omo, where, not having access to flood land along the Omo, they depend very heavily upon rain cultivation. Proceeding further to the west there are a number of

groups, such as (in Ethiopia) the Suri and Bale and (in the Sudan) the Didinga and Murle, whose languages are not mutually intelligible with Mursi although there are many close parallels, both lexical and grammatical. It is also evident, from what ethnographic information there is available (see for example Lewis, 1972) that the Mursi have many other cultural features in common with the most westerly of these groups. Turning now to the Bodi, it has already been pointed out that in terms of environment and economy they have a great deal in common with the Mursi. Their mix of cattle herding and cultivation seems to be similar to that of the Mursi, as do their transhumance movements. The material culture of the two groups is virtually identical, as is their physical appearance. Although their languages are not mutually intelligible, Bender (1971, p. 176) found a 53% basic vocabulary correlation between them. North and west of the Bodi, in the foothills of the Ethiopian Plateau, there are found speakers of the same language, who are known as Teshana, but who lead a sedentary and almost entirely agricultural existence. Further still to the north west are found a group of shifting cultivators, the Majangir, who, although possessing no cattle whatsoever, are clearly members of the same Surma (or Didinga-Murle) language group (Stauder, 1971).

Both local tradition and oral history on the one hand and the observation of current events on the other support the view that the current disposition of Surma-speaking peoples is the result of population movements which have not been haphazard and random but which have followed a certain recognizable direction, mainly eastwards from the southern Sudan into the Lower Omo valley and then northwards and westwards into the lower ranges of the Ethiopian Plateau. As noted above, the Mursi say that they entered their present territory from the west bank of the Omo, having made a circular, anti-clockwise migration from their heartland. Using the names of defunct age-sets which are still remembered, the furthest I have been able to go back in oral history is to the middle of the last century. The earliest age-set anyone living could remember was initiated around that date, and it is said to be the members of this age-set who were the first to eat hippopotamus meat. We can, I think, hazard a guess that first Mursi occupation of the immediate banks of the Omo took place somewhere between 1800 and 1850. It has also been noted that, according to Mursi tradition, they first occupied the south of their present territory and proceeded from there northwards, pushing back the Bodi in the process. When, in 1896, an Italian expedition under Vittorio Böttogo, followed the left bank of the Omo as far as Lake Turkana, the greatest concentration of Mursi was found at the Omo between the southwestern extremity of the Mursi mountains and the junction of the Omo and the Mago. There is no doubt that today most Mursi live in the north. They say that they first began to cultivate at Mara and at their most northerly Omo cultivation site, Kuduma, when the fathers of those

who are today middle-aged were young men – perhaps in the 1920's. But it is clear that this occupation had not been fully consolidated by 1952, when the peace-making ceremonies were held following the last but one Mursi-Bodi war, since the Mursi held their ceremony about twenty miles south of the Mara.

Bodi tradition and oral history perfectly accords on these points with that of the Mursi. The Bodi see themselves as having been pushed northwards by the Mursi both at the Omo and in the grassland. It is also evident that the Bodi are seen by *their* northern and eastern neighbours, the highland Dime agriculturalists, as invaders. Many Bodi have cultivation areas on the mountain slopes bordering Dime country which receive a more plentiful rainfall than does the valley floor. Indeed it seems that many Bodi have permanently settled there. According to Dr David Todd, who has carried out fieldwork among the Dime, the Bodi are much feared by these highland agriculturalists. It is interesting to note that the extension of administration to these highland areas by the Ethiopian Government during the last fifty years has not provided the highlanders with an effective defense against the lowland cattle herders. Indeed, it has probably made them more vulnerable. Before the advent of firearms in the area the lowlanders were dependent on highland smiths and metalworkers for their weapons. Nowadays these same lowlanders provide a lucrative and relatively safe market for traders in arms and ammunition who cannot operate openly in the highlands because of the presence of police.

Finally, this pattern of northward movement among Surma-speaking peoples is confirmed by what Stauder has to say of the Majangir: 'The affinities of Majangir with tribes to their south correlate with Majangir traditions of having come from the south in the indefinite past. Genealogies and life histories indicate that Majangir settlement in recent times has continued to shift northward' (1971, p. 1).

I think it can be fairly confidently asserted that long-term population movements among Surma-speaking peoples have been in the general direction indicated above. Knowing exactly what determined this direction is another matter. Presumably, ecological and geographical factors (including possibly long-term fluctuations in climate) have been very influential. The fact that the peoples concerned were cattle herders would have directed them to country suitable for cattle, while bovine sleeping sickness, rinderpest and drought would have made the occupation of high land attractive, such occupation being accompanied by a change from transhumant and nomadic herding in the direction of sedentary mixed farming or shifting cultivation. In any event, I believe it is this movement of population which should be regarded as having produced, through a process of linguistic and cultural differentiation, the ethnic groups I have been talking about: Chai, Mursi, Bodi, Teshana and Majangir. While the Mursi think of themselves as having set out, as Mursi,

from their original homeland on a vast anti-clockwise migration, the truth is that they are a temporary coalescence in a movement of proto-Surma peoples – a movement incidentally, the general direction of which does indeed appear to have been anti-clockwise.

The Nuer and the Dinka

The above account clearly invites comparison with the classic case of Nuer 'expansion' against the Dinka and in particular with the interpretation put upon this 'expansion' by Sahlins in his article on segmentary lineage organization (1961). Both the Mursi and the Bodi are related linguistically (being members of the same Nilo-Saharan language family) to the Nuer and Dinka, and there are also many other cultural similarities. They are all 'subjective' pastoralists for whom cattle are a secondary source of subsistence, in terms of the contribution they make to the daily diet, but of vital importance in maintaining what Evans-Pritchard calls the 'ecological equilibrium'. Like the Nuer and the Dinka, the Mursi and the Bodi are especially closely related to each other in these ways and yet they are also long-term enemies. The Mursi, furthermore, like the Nuer are seen by both sides as expansionists, so the problem of accounting for the apparently one-sided nature of hostilities seems to arise with both pairs of peoples.

There are reasons to believe that the Mursi-Bodi case may be a particularly instructive one to compare with that of the Nuer-Dinka. Firstly, due to the virtual absence of government administration in the lower Omo region relations between groups have not been frozen, as they have been in the southern Sudan for at least the last fifty years, through the imposition of an outside administrative structure. It is therefore still possible to observe here actual relations, both of peace and war, which can only be hinted at and speculated about with the aid of scanty historical sources for the Nuer and the Dinka. Secondly, it may be that the Mursi-Bodi case presents us with a conveniently clear cut, small-scale and therefore simplified set of circumstances. In terms of population numbers the Mursi (4-5,000) and the Bodi (3-4,000) are certainly not comparable to the Nuer (200,000) and the Dinka (900,000). We are clearly talking about quite different orders of groupings. Nevertheless, it may be that in the former case we can see at work, in a conveniently simplified fashion, processes which are also at work, although difficult to recognize with any clarity, in the inter-relations of the welter of groups making up the Nuer and Dinka populations. The ecology of Bodi and Mursi country also helps in this simplification. For we have here what is essentially an oblong piece of territory, with a river flowing from north to south along its western fringe and the same bands of natural resources following roughly the direction of the river. Topographical features and ecological resources have here channelled population movements in a particular direction. The northward movement of Mursi against Bodi can be observed, in

a way that it is impossible to observe Nuer 'expansion' against the Dinka. Even if the latter process were observable furthermore, it would be taking place on a much larger scale and in a much more complex topographical and ecological context than the former. It may be, then, that in the Mursi-Bodi case we have a conveniently simplified and clear-cut 'experiment' to which Mauss's dictum that 'it is easier to observe the digestive process in an oyster than in man' may be applied. In any event, a number of conclusions seem to me worth drawing from the above account which may be relevant to the continuing debate about the Nuer and the Dinka and about the role of segmentary lineage organization in territorial advance.

The first conclusion is that lineality is not a necessary feature of a segmentary system which has the kind of 'massing effect' and consequent 'structural relativity' which Sahlins sees as 'unique' to segmentary lineage organizations of the Tiv-Nuer type. I do not think there can be any doubt that Mursi territorial sections form a segmentary system, not just in the weak sense in which, as has often been pointed out, all kinds of societies and social groups are segmentary, but in a strong sense. Apart from the mere fact of segmentation there is present here, firstly, what Sahlins calls 'segmentary sociability', meaning that 'sub-groups of the same inclusive group are more sociable than sub-groups of different inclusive segments' (1961, p. 331). As Sahlins points out, this is a common political phenomenon which nevertheless has special salience in segmentary lineage systems because, in the absence of 'a permanent tribal political structure' it operates 'automatically to determine the level of collective political action'. The same may be said of the segmentary territorial system of the Mursi. Secondly, 'complementary opposition or the massing effect' can be recognized here. That is, 'in any opposition between parties A and B, all those more closely related to A than to B will stand with A against B and vice versa'. Where the Mursi are concerned this opposition between sections is manifested in recurrent ceremonies (for example in duelling contests and in the holding of initiation ceremonies) as well as in long-term movements of population into territory occupied or claimed by others. It also shares the 'uniqueness of Tiv-Nuer complementary opposition' in that it 'creates the structure: without opposition the higher segments do not exist'. Thirdly there is what Sahlins calls 'structural relativity': that is, the sections, like Tiv and Nuer lineages, 'are not permanent, absolute social entities, but relative ones'. The section, like the lineage segment, 'cannot stand alone, but can only stand against.'

Sahlins argues that for the Tiv and Nuer 'the lineage system can be said to produce the structure for political consolidation'. He goes on to admit that 'there is plenty of evidence for the Nuer, at least, that *in origin* the process sometimes worked the other way around, that the genealogy is fitted to political realities' (1961, p. 331). Genealogical segmentation among the Mursi does not correspond

to territorial segmentation, but their 'political consolidation' appears to be essentially the same as that of the Nuer, as this is understood by Sahlins: namely it seems to be achieved through the 'massing' of segments 'for external opposition'. If lineality, or 'local-genealogical segmentation', is not a necessary feature of this kind of 'political consolidation' what is its role among the Nuer? I suggest that it is not so much an 'organization of predatory expansion' as a means of camouflaging that expansion from the Nuer themselves. That is, it helps to preserve an illusion of permanence in a society which, like that of the Mursi, is not so much expanding but which, if one may so put it, is expansion. Which raises the question, 'What is the functional equivalent of lineality among the Mursi?' Although they recognize that they have not always lived in their present territory, the Mursi believe that their society was created by God, at the beginning of time, and along with all the other peoples by whom they now find themselves surrounded. If the argument of this essay is correct, how do the Mursi preserve this illusion of permanence in the face of the fact that their society is, by its very nature, ephemeral?

The answer to this question lies, I believe, in the relationship between territorial organization and age organization. I have mentioned two ceremonial activities to do with age: duelling which is an annual event bringing into conflict local groups of section age-mates, and initiation which is an event taking place at irregular intervals of between ten and twenty five years and which also brings together local groups of age-mates on a sectional basis. There are a number of other age ceremonies which are comparable to initiation in that they are held periodically to promote local groups of age-mates from one grade to another. Because they have both a temporal and a spatial reference, I see these ceremonies as defining not only a cyclical series of temporal divisions of the population, based on the physiological ageing of individuals, but also a linear series of spatial divisions based on a continuous northward movement. Intervals between successive age ceremonies vary, and the Mursi have a number of *ad hoc* explanations to account for what they see as recent departures from 'normal' practice. I believe, however, that these apparent abnormalities become understandable when it is realized that the age ceremonies themselves serve a purpose in defining the internal territorial divisions of Mursi society, rather as the periodic peace-making ceremonies define its external boundary. Failure to hold a particular ceremony, therefore, when it is thought appropriate – when the temporal limit has been reached – may result, partly, from uncertainty as to the appropriate spatial limit which should be set to its 'congregation'. In short, Mursi age organization is an appropriate functional equivalent, in the context of territorial advance, of Nuer segmentary lineage organization because it brings together, in a single conceptual framework, the dimensions of space and time.⁹

Secondly, the argument of this essay merely underlines the fact that ethnic groups are given an unreal permanence both in a temporal and spatial sense, no less by anthropologists, intent on analysing a particular 'social system', than by the myths and traditions of the people themselves. There are three ways in which this can happen as far as anthropological accounts are concerned. Firstly, large numbers of different groups, speaking different dialects, inhabiting different territories and having only tenuous political links with each other, may be lumped together under a common name and treated as a single unambiguous unit. This appears to be what has happened with the Nuer and the Dinka, and especially with the latter, as Southall points out (1976, p. 466). Secondly a particular group may be focused upon because it appears to be well bounded geographically and culturally, with no account being taken of the effect its external relations may have had and be having on its internal relations. The Mursi, for example, are hemmed in by very clear geographical boundaries, which makes them a conveniently self-contained and manageable unit from the point of view of the fieldworker. But the danger is that this convenience may become a theoretical device. Mursi society is not a self-contained system, however 'isolated' it may appear. Thirdly, the absence of any, or at least of reliable, historical information may become an excuse for ignoring time. That is, the anthropologist may invest 'his people' not only with spatial but also with temporal distinctiveness. Thus Sahlins argues that the Nuer intruded into a habitat which had already been occupied by Dinka before they, the Nuer, arrived. As Newcomer and, following him, Southall, have pointed out, it seems more likely that the present Nuer and Dinka are the result of a process of linguistic and cultural differentiation among a group of 'proto-Dinka': that, in other words, neither the 'Dinka' nor the 'Nuer' were there 'first'.

A third conclusion which, with the Nuer and Dinka in mind, can be drawn from the argument of this paper is that when one group of people are consistently successful in their predations on another it may not necessarily be appropriate to ask 'what is the secret of their success'? If one were to ask such a question of the Mursi, a question which has so frequently been asked of the Nuer, it would certainly be very difficult to find an adequate answer. As noted above, Bodi territorial segments display an exactly equivalent capacity for 'massing' to those of the Mursi. Neither group, of course, possesses a segmentary lineage organization. Neither group has a distinctively different set of ecological conditions to cope with, and their transhumance movements and settlement patterns are virtually identical. Differences of this kind have been suggested in the debate over the Nuer and the Dinka as explanations of the superior military capacity of the Nuer. The assumption has been, therefore, that Nuer expansion has been essentially a matter of military effectiveness. One reason for this assumption may well be that none of the

authors, including Evans-Pritchard, were able actually to observe the military activities in question. From what has been said above it is clear that Mursi movement into Bodi territory cannot be seen as a matter of military superiority at all. The tactics of Mursi-Bodi hostilities do not require large scale organization of any kind, and the consequences of a war, in terms of peace-making and territorial advance, have nothing to do with the number of people killed on either side – which almost certainly is going to be more or less equal.

If the argument of this essay is correct, however, it is not appropriate to ask this sort of question at all. The Mursi, as we know them today, did not first exist, and then, because of certain features of their culture and social organization, manage to expand at the expense of their neighbours. Indeed this is why I prefer not to speak of Mursi 'expansion' at all. The Mursi, it has been argued, are a product of a large scale movement going far beyond them both in space and time, and one must therefore keep this larger movement in mind when trying to understand the dynamics of Mursi-Bodi relations. If one does this, it becomes meaningless to ask what it is about the Mursi *themselves* which accounts for their 'success'. The Mursi did not make a journey: a journey made them.

NOTES

¹ Fieldwork was carried out between 1969 and 1970 and between 1973 and 1974, and was financed by grants from the Social Science Research Council. Additional support, for the first period of fieldwork, was provided by the Central Research Fund of the University of London, the Tweedie Exploration Fellowship Committee of the University of Edinburgh and the Royal Geographical Society. Grateful acknowledgement is made in all of these bodies.

² Mean annual rainfall in Mursi country is probably around 500 mm (20 in.), this estimate being based upon data given by Buizer (1971) for the lower Omo region.

³ That is, 'an extreme form' of bushland 'where woody plants form a closed stand through which man or the larger ungulates can pass only with extreme difficulty and in which the land has no value for grazing' (Pratt, *Litcalway and Liwynne*, 1966, p. 373).

⁴ Brown (1971) estimates that, in Kenya, 'The sale of one bullock will enable a pastoralist to buy enough grain to feed his family for from four to six months.'

⁵ Cf. Bender, 1971, p. 176, where the percentage of basic vocabulary shared by Mursi and a number of other cognate languages, including Bodi (referred to by their self-name, Me'en), is set out in tabular fashion.

⁶ The Mursi and the Bodi obtain rifles (mostly the 8 mm. Austrian Mannlicher, which was carried by the Italian troops who occupied Ethiopia between 1935 and 1940) and ammunition from highland traders, in exchange for leopard skins, ivory and cattle.

⁷ For this information I am grateful to Dr Katsuyoshi Fukui, who carried out fieldwork among the Bodi between 1971 and 1973.

⁸ Katsuyoshi Fukui, personal communication.

⁹ This point is dealt with in greater detail in Turton, 1978.

References

- BENDER, M. L. 1971 *The Languages of Ethiopia: A New Lexicostatic Classification and Some Problems of Diffusion*. *Anthropological Linguistics* 13, No. 5: 165-228.

- 1976 Nilo-Saharan Overview. In: M. L. Bender (ed.), *The Non-Semitic Languages of Ethiopia*. African Studies Center, Michigan State University.
- BROWN, L. H. 1971 The Biology of Pastoral Man as a Factor in Conservation. *Biological Conservation* 3, No. 2: 93-100.
- BUTZER, K. W. 1971 *Recent History of an Ethiopian Delta: The Omo River and The Level of Lake Rudolph*. University of Chicago, Department of Geography Research Paper No. 136.
- DAHL, G. and A. HJORT 1976 *Having Herds: Pastoral Herd Growth and Household Economy*. Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology 2, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Stockholm.
- GLICKMAN, M. 1972 The Nuer and the Dinka: a Further Note. *Mun* (N.S.) 7: 586-94.
- GOUGH, K. 1971 Nuer Kinship: A Re-valuation. In: T. O. Beidelman (ed.), *The Translation of Culture*. London, Tavistock.
- GREENBERG, J. H. 1963 *The Languages of Africa*. Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press.
- LEWIS, B. A. 1972 *The Mursi: Red Chiefs and Black Commoners*. Oxford Clarendon Press.
- NEWCOMER, P. J. 1972 The Nuer are Dinka: an Essay on Origins and Environmental Determinism. *Mun* (N.S.) 7: 5-11
- PRATT, D. T., P. J. GREENWAY and M. D. GWYNNE 1966 A Classification of East African Rangeland, with an Appendix on Terminology. *Journal of Applied Ecology* 5, No. 3: 369-81.
- SAHLINS, M. D. 1961 The Segmentary Lineage: An Organisation of Predatory Expansion. *American Anthropologist* 63: 322-45
- SOUTHALL, A. 1976 Nuer and Dinka are People: Ecology, Ethnicity and Logical Possibility. *Mun* (N.S.) 11: 463-91
- STAUDER, J. 1971 *The Mursi: Ecology and Society of a South-west Ethiopian People*. Cambridge University Press
- TUCKER, A. H. and M. BRYAN 1956 *The Non-Bantu Languages of Northeast Africa* (Handbook of African Languages Part III). Oxford University Press
- TURTON, D. 1978 Territorial Organisation and Age among the Mursi. In: P. T. W. Baxter and U. Almagor: *Age, Generation and Time: Some Features of East African Age Organisations*. Hurst, London.