Ethnographic film aesthetics and narrative traditions: Proceedings from NAFA 2
Ed. Peter Ian Crawford and Jan Ketil Simonsen
Intervention Press, Aarhus, 1992

Chapter 8

How to Make a Speech in Mursi

David Turton

Introduction

When I began thinking about the conference paper on which this chapter is based, I took it for granted that the most useful contribution I could make – or at least, the one I was most qualified to attempt – would be to establish the characteristics of narrative style amongst the Mursi of southwestern Ethiopia, a people amongst whom I have been doing field work, on and off, for the past twenty years. Over that time I have recorded and transcribed various stories, myths, and historical traditions, so it promised to be a fairly straightforward task to search my notebooks and collection of tape recordings for suitable examples and to subject these to analysis.

The result of this search, however, was far from encouraging. The main category of Mursi stories, it seemed, was stories about animals, told mainly to children: short, humorous accounts of how one animal outdid or cheated another – how the hyena, for example tricked the lion into drowning his own mother. This is the most collected and discussed type of African folk-tale, whether or not the interest in it shown by European collectors is a reflection of its true preponderance over other types.[1] In any event, I could not find in my notebooks examples of the kind of stories I instinctively felt I needed for my present purpose – stories set in the human world, either about everyday events and characters or cultural heroes.

It then occurred to me that what was 'wrong' with Mursi animal stories for a study of narrative style was not their content but the way they are told – or rather not told. That is, they are not told in public, by acknowledged story-tellers whose skill is subject to the evaluation of their audience: they are not a form of verbal art: or *performance* (Bauman, 1975). Although I cannot assert with confidence that the

absence of stories about people in my notebooks reflects a true lack of such stories amongst the Mursi, I can assert, with total confidence, that story-telling is not a kind of speech activity which is expected by the Mursi 'to be rendered in the performance mode' (Bauman, op. cit., p. 294). People do not gather round of an evening as, for example, they do amongst the Limba of Sierra Leone, to enjoy a session of story-telling (Finnegan, 1966, pp. 64-5). Here was an interesting lesson in itself - namely that cultures vary in the kinds of speech activity they define as suitable for performances.

The reason why an analysis of Mursi stories, whether about animals or people, did not seem an appropriate basis for making a contribution to a discussion about film narrative, then, is that they are not, unlike film, a form of narrative *performance*. Having come to this conclusion, it was obvious where I should be looking instead: namely at oratory, a form of speech activity which is highly valued and much engaged in by Mursi men and which can *only* be engaged in as performance. Although most likely to be treated by anthropologists as a technique of political control, as in the influential collection of essays edited by Maurice Bloch (1975), it is obvious that oratory can also be seen as a form of literary expression - or oral literature.

Looking at oratory, furthermore, helps us to make an immediate connection with film, since the public eloquence which is a characteristic of people in East African herding societies has undoubtedly contributed much to the success of some of the most highly regarded films to have been made about them. Llewelyn-Davies's *The Women's Olamal* (1983) is a good case in point, since it includes not only formalised public oratory, but also revealing comments and explanations about their own behaviour, made to the camera, by the Maasai themselves (MacDougall, 1992).[2] Indeed, it may be that it is the high cultural evaluation placed upon oratory in these communities which explains the everyday linguistic skills of their members, including the explicitness and conciseness with which they talk about their own behaviour and which is so much appreciated by film-makers, their audiences and anthropological fieldworkers alike. But a word of warning is in order here about the supposed transparency of this linguistic 'self-revelation'.

Oratory is a generalised skill which is learnt, like language itself, by imitation and practice from an early age, and not by formal instruction. This kind of knowledge is acquired through practice and participation, and is therefore non-linguistic (that is non-instructional) in origin (Bloch, 1991). This would explain why I have never heard a speaker explain, or

been able to provoke one into explaining, how a speech is constructed. The nearest thing I have heard to such an account is the statement that 'the words just come' when one walks back and forth in front of an audience. As Bloch points out, much of the knowledge we, as anthropologists, are interested in is like this: 'it exists in people's heads in a non-linguistic form' (1991, p. 189). For this reason we should be wary when informants give such knowledge precise linguistic expression in the form 'This is why we do such things ... This is what this means' (p. 193). If Bloch is right about this, we should treat with some scepticism the attractively explicit and eloquent statements made by members of East African cattle herding societies when they comment on their own behaviour, whether for the benefit of each other, in debates and public meetings, or for the benefit of outsiders, such as anthropological fieldworkers and documentary film-makers.

In the next section I shall comment on the characteristics of Mursi oratory which make it appropriate to view it as a form of oral literature. I shall then examine, with the help of one example, some of the techniques which an orator uses to achieve his objective - this being, in a general sense, to persuade as many as possible of his audience to accept, temporarily at least, his view of a given situation. I shall end by discussing, with the benefit of hindsight, some of the difficulties Leslie Woodhead and I encountered in making a film about Mursi oratory in 1974 - *The Mursi.*

Oratory as oral literature

Due mainly to the work of Parry and Lord (1954) on Serbo-Croatian oral epic poetry, it now seems to be generally accepted that the texts of oral literature are not first composed and then 'handed down' from generation to generation in as near word perfect a form as possible but that they are, essentially, 'compositions-in-performance' (Finnegan, 1981).

Parry's and Lord's work originated with questions about the classic Homeric epics. How, for example, was it possible for a minstrel to memorise the 15,000 lines of the Iliad? And yet, if they were not memorised, how were they transmitted without writing? The answer suggested by the Serbo-Croatian material was that such epics are literally made up by the performer as he goes along. What he does have to memorise is a store of ready-made formulas and phrases. By combining these in different ways, according to his own experience and the nature of the occasion, he is able to generate a unique and individual oral text. This is what Bauman calls the 'emergent quality' of performance.

The point is that completely novel and completely fixed texts represent the poles of an ideal continuum, and that between the poles lies the range of emergent text structures to be found in empirical performance. The study of the factors contributing to the emergent quality of the oral literary text promises to bring about a major reconceptualization of the nature of the text, freeing it from the apparent fixity it assumes when abstracted from performance and placed on the written page (Bauman, 1975, p. 303).

Such an approach to oral literature is eminently applicable to Mursi oratory. Each speech is a unique and individual text, composed by the speaker in the moment of performance. The fluency and eloquence of the speaker is made possible by his mastery of standard phrases and 'formulaic' expressions which enable him to put together a narrative which is both appropriate to the occasion and responsive to the mood of the audience. The role of the audience is crucial.

... a would-be speaker, conscious of the fact that he is by no means the only man present who is looking for an opportunity to air his views must attempt to judge correctly the earliest possible moment at which to make his move, thereby establishing his right to speak next.

Since would-be speakers are thus under pressure to detect the slightest sign of weakening in a speaker's hold over his audience, this in turn puts pressure on speakers to be brief, to keep to the point and to convince the meeting that they have something useful to contribute ... The successful speakers are those who are not only instrumental in bringing to an end the speeches immediately preceding their own, but who also do not finish speaking themselves until they are ready. It is by no means the case, however, that the most successful speeches are the longest. Knowing when to stop is as important as knowing when, and indeed whether, to begin (Turton, 1975, p. 173).

Compare that with the following comments of Lord about the influence of the audience on the 'singer of tales' in Yugoslavia.

The instability of the audience requires a marked degree of concentration on the part of the singer in order that he may sing at all; it also tests to the utmost his dramatic ability and his narrative skill in keeping the audience as attentive as possible. But it is the length of a song which is most affected by the audience's restlessness ... If he is fortunate he may find it possible to sing until he is tired without interruption from the audience ... It is more likely that ... he will shorten his song so that it may be finished within the limit of time for which he feels the audience may be counted on ... Leaving out of account for the moment the question of the talent of the singer, one can say that the length of the song depends upon the audience (1960, pp. 16-17).

The ability to make good speeches is said by the Mursi to be a necessary attribute of the politically influential man and the arena within which this ability is exercised is a competitive one: a meeting at which a succession of speakers put forward different, and possibly opposing, views. It seemed immediately appropriate to me to call these meetings 'debates' but I realised, much later, that it would not do to analyse them simply as procedures for rational decision making – as occasions for weighing up the pros and cons of different possible courses of action.

For one thing, it was often impossible to say what specific decision had been reached at the end of a debate and, for another, when it *was* possible to identify a decision, it was usually one that had been evident before the debate started. If this was decision-making then, it was decision-making not by reasoning but by rhetoric. The aim was not to convince but to persuade (Paine, 1981, p. 13); to get the listener to make an emotional and behavioural commitment rather than an intellectual one. What was problematic was common action, not intellectual assent.

Secondly, debates are explicitly seen as ends in themselves, as a 'good thing', whether or not there is any particularly pressing matter to be discussed. The content of the debate, from this point of view, is less important than its form: the coming together of the men of the local community to reaffirm their commitment to a set of common values which are dramatised in the oral performance of the speakers. The feeling seems to be that 'the community that debates together stays together'. In a phrase of Malinowski's (1926, p. 36), cited by Finnegan (1966, p. 65), the debate is an 'act of sociability'. This explains why debates are considered necessary, or at least desirable, components of such public ritual events as weddings, meat eatings and age set ceremonies.

When considering the narrative style of oratory, one can take as one's unit of analysis either the individual speech, comparing several speeches from different debates, or the debate as a whole, comparing different debates in order to identify their common structural features. A Mursi speech, however, is very much the product of the particular debate in which it occurs, being influenced by and influencing other speeches in the same debate. The speakers may therefore be seen not only as the individual authors of their particular contributions but also as the 'joint authors' of the debate as a whole. For this reason, it is difficult to analyse a Mursi speech as a free-standing event, as one might analyse a speech made by a politician in a literate setting, where speeches are commonly written in advance of their performance.

Taking the debate as the unit of performance and analysis, one can recognise in it a classical narrative form: an initial problem, contradiction or dilemma; a more or less lengthy exploration of this problem and of various possible solutions to it; and, finally, a more or less satisfactory resolution (Nichols, 1981, pp. 74-80). Debates almost always begin with a predominantly factual speech in which a state of affairs is described which presents a problem for the local community. This speech is often made by someone bringing 'word' (*logo*) of events or developments elsewhere in Mursiland. Succeeding speakers explore various aspects of the problem, relating it to similar problems which have occurred in the past and making proposals for action. The last speech, usually made by one of the most senior men present, consists of a summing up or the proceedings in a form around which the whole meeting can unite.

Those who regularly speak at the end of a debate usually belong to a category of informal leaders or 'big men', called *jalaba.* The fact that *jalaba* speak, and expect to be allowed to speak, at the end of debates suggests that their contributions are particularly relevant to action - to behaviour, that is, which takes place *after* the debate has finished. It is difficult, however, to represent what is said in a debate as influential in terms of subsequent action because, to do this, one would have to show that there was genuine disagreement before the debate began and that there were genuine alternative courses of action available. In fact, much use is made by *jalaba* of the 'I told you so' form of argument. This consists of pointing out that, if one's advice, given publicly in a previous debate, had been followed, the difficulties being discussed in the present debate would *not* have arisen. It consists, in other words, of demonstrating that one has not been influential.

It is more important that *jalaba* be proved right than that they should

influence behaviour because their essential function is to legitimise decisions rather than to make them; to connect contingent (i.e., questionable) behaviour with necessary (i.e., unquestioned) values, thus making collective, concerted action possible. Mursi *jalaba* perform the same function as that which, according to Friedrich, was performed by the Roman Senate: to add 'a knowledge of values shared and traditions hallowed to whatever the people wanted to do' (1958, p. 30). In a debate we see the local community coming together, not so much to make decision as to make itself.

Techniques of verbal persuasion

I shall now use a short extract from one speech to illustrate some of the standard techniques of Mursi oratory as a form of verbal art, or performance. The speech I have chosen comes from a debate which took place in January 1991 while we were filming *The Land is Bad* (Woodhead and Turton, 1991) and *Nitha* (Woodhead and Turton, 1991).

In January this year there took place at Kurum, in southern Mursiland, an age set ritual, called *nitha,* which had the effect of giving adult status to all the men of the local area between the ages of roughly 15 and 45 - this age span being a consequence of the fact that the same ritual was last held in 1961. By going through the *nitha,* these men were moved from the senior grade of boys, called *teru,* to the junior grade of adults, called *rora* and became life members of a new age set. At the same time the set immediately above them moved from the junior to the senior grade of adults, called *bara.* The same ceremony was held a few months later for men of the same age in the north of the country (the south takes precedence in such matters because it is the historical and cultural 'centre' of Mursiland.)

The *nitha* had become urgent and inescapable because many of the 'boys' were already married, some of them even with married children, while the members of the *bara* grade, the only ones qualified to organise the ceremony, were dying out. But although the senior *teru,* especially those who had been occupying this grade since the early 1960s, were impatient to become legal adults, those who had only recently become *teru,* (and who were still, therefore, in their teens and early twenties and several years away from the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood) were not so keen to lose their official status as *teru,* for that of premature adulthood. This conflict of interest between the junior and senior members of an age set is endemic to the system, a logical consequence of the interval between the formation of successive age sets, and it is not

surprising that it should surface just before a new set is formed. It constitutes not so much a *problem* for the community as a *dilemma:* one of those intellectually irresolvable cultural contradictions to which people have to become reconciled in an emotional and behavioural sense. It calls, in other words, for the persuasive use of symbols, in myth, ritual and rhetoric, rather than for reasoning; for persuasion rather than conviction.

The speech from which I am going to quote was made during a debate held at Kurum on 16 January, a week before the *nitha* began, by A'dulu Malgoloin, a senior *teru.* The debate had been organised by and for the *teru* themselves and the overt subject of the speeches was the need to get on with the last-minute preparations for the ceremony - essentially the bringing to Kurum of the necessary cattle. A'dulu focused on the dilemma just noted - the predictable and conventional reluctance of the younger *teru* to take part in the *nitha.* One can see here how oratory is used to organise the experience of the audience (Paine, 1981, p. 10): to persuade it to accept as right and inevitable a particular view of the world - defined as a 'Mursi' view - and thus to make common action possible.

> Who was it who started all this fighting and arguing?
> Is it good to fight over the *nitha?*
> Is it good to fight among ourselves?
> Is it not *we* [the senior *teru*] who should be beating *you* [the junior *teru*] - we who cleansed the land with chyme?
> If we were behaving as your ancestors did - if we were real Mursi - would you be here [at the debate] at all?
> Wouldn't you be in the bush, where you belong?
> Is not a cow tethered by its owner?
> Haven't you heard the saying, 'They'll have to buy themselves new hair in Baco'?
> Wasn't that said about you?
> When Bone told his 'children' [the junior *teru*] that they'd have to buy new hair in Baco, were they all debating together like this?
> If we are debating together, it is because the land has become thin [i.e., there are very few senior *teru*].
> Aren't you going to speak with one voice?

Perhaps the most immediately obvious characteristic of this passage, to a European audience, is that it consists almost entirely of rhetorical questions. Leaving things implied, implicit, assumed, is one of the hallmarks

of rhetoric, recognised by Aristotle (Paine, 1981, p. 13). Asking questions, the answers to which are so obvious to the audience that they can be left *un*answered, is an effective means of persuasion for at least three reasons. Firstly, the more use a speaker is able to make of them - and in this case he has used them to carry forward virtually his entire argument - the more he forces his listeners to recognise the common ground that exists not only between them and him but also between themselves. Secondly, by supplying the missing answers (although not out loud), they are drawn into the speaker's performance; they become a party to his argument. His speech becomes, in a sense, their speech. Thirdly, the members of the audience are not given time to reflect on or think about the argument: they are led from one step to the next, with no possibility for dissent, until the conclusion aimed at by the speaker is reached.[3]

Another obvious characteristic of this passage is the heavy use of metaphor. Like rhetorical questions, metaphors also have the effect of emphasising the common ground that unites speaker with audience and the members of the audience themselves. By calling upon his listeners to interpret a metaphor, the speaker is also drawing them into his speech, making them a party to his performance, and on his terms. Ivo Strecker makes this point well in his discussion of 'symbolisation and social domination' among the Hamar. Once he begins to work out the 'deeper truth' of a metaphor, the listener

> has been caught, as it were, in the net of the creator (or simply the user) of the metaphor and as he tries to imagine what, after all, the truth might be, he gets more and more in tune with the creator ('Aha, that's what he meant!') who has thus subtly but effectively involved him and can now begin to exercise an influence over him (1988, p. 201).

When metaphors are presented to the audience in the form of rhetorical questions, their persuasive impact is presumably increased. We have two examples of this near the beginning of the passage quoted. After asking 'Is the *nitha* something we should fight about amongst ourselves?', A'dulu goes on to ask 'It is not for *us* to beat *you,* we who cleansed the land with *chyme?*' This refers to the fact that A'dulu and his age mates became *teru* at the time of the previous *nitha,* in 1961, by ritually 'cleansing' the settled area with the undigested stomach contents of a sacrificial ox. It was they, the '*teru* mothers' (*teru jone*), who subsequently admitted younger boys to the *teru* grade by means of a ritual

known as ‘giving the string’, part of which involves the beating of the new recruits with thin branches.

At a literal level, then, this phrase may be interpreted as a reminder to the junior *teru* in the audience (those who were murmuring against the holding of the *nitha*) of their dependent and subordinate status in relation to the senior *teru*. But there is a metaphorical meaning also, which I only became aware of when I was working through a recording of the speech with a Mursi informant. He pointed out that ‘beat’ also referred to the speech itself. Just as the senior *teru* beat the juniors with branches when admitting them to the *teru* grade, so they also ‘beat’ them with words on occasions like this. A’dulu is saying that junior *teru* should be seen but not heard.

Or, rather, not even seen, since he goes on, in the next few lines, to say that in the past, when the proportion of senior to junior *teru* was greater, they would not even have been present at such a debate. They would have been in the bush (i.e., herding cattle) where, traditionally, they belong. Perhaps it was this implicit reference to herding that led A’dulu, in the next line, to use the image of the heard owner, making decisions about his herd (in this case, keeping a sick animal tethered at the homestead) as a metaphor for the kind of relationship he and his age mates should have with his younger listeners: ‘Is not a cow’, he says, ‘tethered by its owner?’

The final characteristic of this passage I want to refer to is the use made in it of references to the past. Appeals to precedent are an effective technique of persuasion for at least three reasons. Firstly, they buttress the authority of the speaker in relation to his listeners, especially if most of them are too young to remember the events referred to. Secondly, they construct a fictional past to which both audience and speaker are heir but, by comparison with which, the present can be seen as an aberration. The real force of an appeal to precedent, then, is that it looks to the future: it gives, or appears to give, the audience a realistic goal to strive for: it *is* possible to manage things differently, the speaker seems to be saying, because they were so managed in the past.

Thirdly, appeals to precedent are one of the principal ways in which a speaker seeks to achieve what I think may be described, in broad terms, as the objective of all Mursi oratory, and possibly of all oratory: to create the widest possible consensus around what is, in fact, a questionable, problematic and even contradictory course of action by forging a link, in the minds of the listeners, between it and some primordial (i.e., unquestioned) value or sentiment. The point is consensus, not truth: the

orator is interested in collective action; in the behavioural, not the intellectual impact of his words; in appealing to the will, not to the mind. This point was well made by Adlai Stevenson: ‘When Cicero spoke, the people said “How well he speaks”. When Demosthenes spoke they said “Let us march!”’ (Cited in Paine 1981, p. 13 and Bailey, 1981, p. 26).

The weakness of rational argument as a technique of political persuasion is that, the more rational the argument the more likely it is to reveal exactly what needs to remain hidden if collective action is to be mobilised: the conflicts of interest with which almost any proposed course of action will be attended in any community. It may be that politicians face a special problem when the explicit appeal to reason rather than to precedent becomes an important means of legitimation for policy and decision making. This appears to have happened in the industrialised world, where rhetoric has ceased to be a body of consciously applied theory and where the world itself is likely to be used as a term of political abuse. But how do you mobilise consensus around a policy by appealing to its reasonableness when it is bound to be more reasonable (that is more advantageous) to some than to others?

The answer, of course, is that the appeal to reason is itself rhetorical and depends for its effectiveness on the rhetorical nature of the appeal going unrecognised. Recent studies have shown that the oratory of Western politicians is as susceptible to an analysis in terms of rhetoric as is Mursi oratory (see, for example, the articles in Paine (ed.), 1981). And as Marcus and Cushman point out, in their highly persuasive text, ‘Ethnographies as Texts’ (1982), *any* kind of written expression, including the work of historians and ethnographers, can be analysed for its ‘rhetorical dimension’:

> Just as the logic of argument of a text is abstractable for a certain purpose such as theoretical discussion, so the rhetorical dimension of a text and its arguments are abstractable for a certain purpose, such as a critical discussion of how a text persuades and effectively communicates its meaning. In either case, the recognised integration of these aspects of a text is suspended for the sake of a particular kind of analysis, but whereas logic denies or ignores the importance of rhetoric in viewing it as a contaminant, rhetoric, as now conceived, never loses sight of its complementary relationship in practice to the logical content of an argument or interpretation, nor to the embeddedness of the latter in the rhetoric of its linguistic expression (p. 55).

Mursi orators often refer to past events by quoting memorable sayings or passages from speeches, made at the time of the events in question, by particularly famous orators. In this way, of course, they enlist the support of these earlier authorities, as though to say, 'If so-and-so were alive now, he would be speaking as I am'. But this practice also suggests that what tends to be remembered about the past is not so much the events themselves as how these were 'processed' by contemporary orators. This in turn suggests that one of the services provided by orators for their communities is to give shape and coherence to the flow of daily events, thereby helping to create a collective view of the present for their contemporaries and a collective view of the past for future generations. Like documentary film-makers and news editors, they produce an 'edited' version of events, which then gets remembered as 'what really happened'. They edit the rushes of community life.

Near the beginning of the passage quoted above, A'dulu manages to compress into one sentence all three of the persuasive techniques I have outlined. The sentence is 'Haven't you heard the statement, "They'll have to get themselves new hair in Baco?"' Here we have, firstly, a rhetorical question; secondly, a metaphorical expression; and thirdly, a past event, which is evoked by means of a statement made about it by a contemporary orator.

The event occurred at the time of the last *nitha,* when A'dulu was between 10 and 15 years old and when those he is addressing, the junior *teru,* had not yet been born. Just before the 1961 *nitha* the junior *teru* were objecting, just as their counterparts were in 1991, to their premature promotion to the *rora* grade. At one of the *teru* debates held at that time, one senior *teru,* Bone, said that those *teru* who objected to becoming *rora* would have their heads beaten so severely (with duelling poles) that they would have to go and buy themselves new hair in the market at Baco (this was formerly the Ethiopian Government's administrative centre for Mursiland).

A'dulu uses this reference to make his point that the junior *teru* would not, traditionally, even have been present at a debate held to discuss preparations for the *nitha.* The explicit function of the quotation, then, is to back up with the force of precedent A'dulu's indignant lambasting, or verbal 'beating', of the recalcitrant junior *teru.* Its implicit and, from the point of view of persuasion and control, probably its most important function was that it reminds the junior *teru* that their situation was not unique: that they were conforming to an historical pattern and that, by rebelling against the system, they were, in fact, supporting it.

Filming oratory

The first *Disappearing World* programme I helped to make about the Mursi (Woodhead and Turton, 1974) was planned as a study of the role of oratory in public decision making. It happened that, in 1973, when the just-recruited anthropologist-researchers for the series, Melissa Llewelyn-Davis and André Singer, were trawling anthropology departments for programme ideas, I was about to leave for a second field trip to the Mursi, the title of my research project being 'Public Discussions and the Exercise of Influence Among the Mursi'. I had realised during my first period of field work (1968-70) that something important must have been going on in the debates I had sat through on so many occasions, with only the faintest idea of what was being said, let alone what the true significance of the speeches was. The language of orators was even more allusive and metaphorical than that of everyday life and, anyway, I then considered the study of debates to be peripheral to my main task which was to describe and analyse something called the 'social organisation' of the Mursi.

I was led to take oratory more seriously for two reasons. Firstly, I had struggled, during the writing of my Ph.D thesis (1973), with the problem of explaining why certain men were credited with more influence than others in the direction and organisation of public affairs. Existing anthropological accounts of 'informal leadership' in 'stateless' societies tended to concentrate on the control and allocation of scarce resources but I did not find it possible to explain the position of Mursi *jalaba* in these terms. Nor did I find much help in existing accounts of leadership amongst East African herders, which tended to focus on such factors as the ability to curse and 'nearness to God' (e.g., Spencer, 1965; Dyson-Hudson, 1966), both of which are universal attributes of 'elderhood'. Given that speech-making is the most visible and empirically observable activity of the politically important man in these societies, it seemed to me that concentration on this activity might help to modify the prevailing picture of a detached, selfless and faceless class of elders, effortlessly cooperating to provide the community with the requisite amount of leadership in public affairs.

Secondly, there were, in the early 1970s, signs of an awakening anthropological interest in public discussions and oratory as a category of social behaviour. Richards and Kuper had edited a collection of essays on village and town councils (1971) and Bloch's collection (1975), focusing specifically on oratory as a means of political control and to which I had contributed a chapter form my Ph. D thesis, was in preparation. These developments were themselves part of a growing anthropological interest

in speech and a parallel increased awareness among linguists that the understanding of language requires ethnographic as well as purely linguistic research (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974).

At the time Melissa Llewelyn-Davis visited me in Manchester in 1973, therefore, I was looking forward to spending the next year in Mursiland, recording, transcribing and analysing public speeches. I therefore proposed a programme about Mursi oratory. The prospect of getting good quality research footage of orators in action was exciting enough, particularly since I knew that the non-verbal behaviour of speakers and audience must be considered along with their verbal behaviour as part of the same communicative event. But by far the most exciting thing, for me, about this collaboration with television was that the proposed programme would make extensive use of sub-titles - more extensive, probably, than in any previous peak time television documentary.[4] It was therefore going to be possible to allow Mursi orators to speak directly to a huge television audience and to give that audience, hopefully, something approaching a first hand experience of public life in Mursiland.

My original hope was that the programme would be about the form rather than the content of debates, since this was to be the focus of my research. It was not important, from this point of view, what the speakers happened to be talking about. I expected the debates we filmed to be concerned mainly with day-to-day herd management decisions - the Mursi refer, idiomatically, to speech making as 'showing the cattle a path'. In a sense, the more innocuous the subject under discussion the easier it would be to focus on the techniques and strategies employed by the speakers. It turned out, however, that, when filming took place (July 1974), the Mursi were engaged in a war with their northern neighbours, the Bodi (Turton, 1979). All the debates we filmed were directly related to the war, which was having a devastating effect on economic production at a time when both peoples had recently emerged from the worst famine in living memory. Inevitably, therefore, the war became the dominant theme of the programme.

For Leslie Woodhead and the film crew (Mike Dodds, camera, and Chris Wangler, sound), who had often worked together for Granada's well known current affairs programme, *World in Action,* it was a familiar situation to be making a film with war as its storyline, albeit in unusually demanding circumstances, both physically and psychologically. For my part, I still viewed debates at that time as serving an essentially pragmatic, technical purpose, so it did not seem to me inappropriate to attempt to use them as a vehicle for telling a story about the progress of the war

which would be understandable to a lay audience in Britain. Oratory certainly made up a large part of the programme, which contained over 300 subtitles. But speech extracts were chosen for subtitling because they helped to carry forward a story about the war and because of the relative ease with which they could be translated into simple English in accordance with fairly strict rules of thumb about the number of letters that could be allowed on the screen at the same time,[5] and for how many frames. The speeches inevitably lost, in being transposed on the screen, their rhetorical richness and became matter-of-fact, direct and pragmatic commentaries on current events. They were given a 'logic' and 'meaning' they did not, and were not intended to, possess. The result was that our programme missed - or did not give itself the opportunity to discover - the real significance of what was going on in the debates, by which I mean its significance for the participants.

When I look now at my original transcriptions, in Mursi, of the speeches we filmed, I realise how years of exposure to the programme has subtly convinced me that what we see on the screen and hear on the sound-track is what actually happened. In fact, what we see is a reconstruction, from which most of the complexity, richness and therefore meaning of the original events has been drained. These events were undoubtedly made meaningful to the British audience by this process of reconstruction, but only at the cost of draining them of their meaning for the participants. This, at least, was the impression I gained when we showed the programme to a Mursi audience for the first time in 1985, even though they clearly enjoyed the experience and commented favourably on what they saw as the historical significance of the programme as a record of their culture.

How, with hindsight, might we have proceeded differently? How, that is, could we have filmed Mursi oratory in such a way as to give a British audience an insight into its meaning for the Mursi themselves? One answer might be that we could have chosen one debate (we filmed four) to provide the programme with its narrative structure. The speeches would have had to be edited, of course, and inter-cut with contextualising material, giving information about events external to the debate. In this way it may have been possible to sustain the interest of the audience while allowing the programme to reflect the structure, and therefore the meaning, which the debate gave to those events for the participants - to reflect, in other words, an indigenous representation of 'reality'. But at this point (as Evans-Pritchard wrote of the theologian at the end of *Nuer Religion*) the film-maker 'takes over from the anthropologist' (1974, p. 372).

Notes

1. Ruth Finnegan thinks that, compared to other kinds of oral literature in Africa, 'The proportion of animal stories seems to have much exaggerated' because they appealed to the predispositions of the collectors (1970, p. 535).
2. Another example is the joint winner of the 1990 Royal Anthropological Institute Film Prize, *The Women Who Smile* (Head and Lydall, 1990), about a neighbouring group to the Mursi, the Hamar.
3. Rhetorical questions are also used with great frequency by the Mursi in ordinary speech, where they have the same effect of emphasising shared experience and common assumptions and limiting the possibility for dissent.
4. Brian Moser, the series producer and founder of Disappearing World, had recently fought and won the battle to use subtitles, rather than voice-over translations, in programmes going out before the *News at Ten.*
5. These rules became formalised, during the making of this and subsequent Mursi programmes, as follows: a) a maximum of 40 letters and space per line and no more than two lines per title; b) a minimum of 1 frame per letter or space, plus 8 frames per line; and c) no title less than 8 frames clear of a cut.

References

Books and articles

Bailey, F. (1981), 'Dimensions of Rhetoric in Conditions of Uncertainty', Paine, R. (ed.), **Politically Speaking: Cross-Cultural Studies of Rhetoric**, Philadelphia.

Bauman, R. (1975), 'Verbal Art as Performance', **American Anthropologist**, 77, pp. 290-311.

Bauman, R. and J. Scherzer (eds.) (1974), **Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking**, Cambridge.

Bloch, M. (1975), **Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society**, London.

Bloch, M. (1991), 'Language, Anthropology and Cognitive Science', **Man**, 26, pp. 183-98.

Dyson-Hudson, N. (1966), **Karamojong Politics**, Oxford.

Evans-Pritchard, E. (1974), **Nuer Religion**, Oxford.

Finnegan, R. (1966), **Limba Stories and Story-Telling**, Oxford.

Finnegan, R. (1970), **Oral Literature in Africa**, Oxford.

Finnegan, R. (1981), 'Literacy and Literature', Lloyd, B. and J. Gay (Eds.), **Universals of Human Thought**, Cambridge.

Friedrich, C.J. (1959), 'Authority, Reason and Discretion', **Nomos I** (Yearbook of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy).

Lord, A. B. (1960), **The Singer of Tales**, New York.

MacDougall, D. (1992), 'Complicities of Style', Crawford, P. I. and D. Turton (Eds.), **Film as ethnography**, Manchester.

Malinowski, B. (1926), **Myth in Primitive Psychology**, Psyche Miniatures, No. 6, London.

Marcus, G. E. and D. Cushman (1982), 'Ethnographies as texts', **Annual Review of Anthropology**, 11, pp. 25-69.

Nichols, B. (1981), **Ideology and the Image: Social Representations in the Cinema and Other Media**, Bloomington.

Paine, R. (Ed.) (1981), **Politically Speaking: Cross-Cultural Studies of Rhetoric**, Philadelphia.

Parry, M. and A. B. Lord (1954), **Serbocroatian heroic songs**, Cambridge Mass. and Belgrade.

Richards, A. and A. Kuper (eds.) (1971), **Councils in Action**, Cambridge.

Spencer, P. (1965), **The Samburu**, London.

Strecker, I. (1988), **The Social Practice of Symbolisation**, London.

Turton, D. (1973), **The Social Organisation of the Mursi**, Ph.D. Thesis, London School of Economics.

Turton, D. (1975), 'The Relationship between Oratory and the Exercise of Influence among the Mursi', Bloch, M. (Ed.), **Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society**, London.

Turton, D. (1979), 'War, Peace and Mursi Identity', Fukui, K. and D. Turton (Eds.), **Warfare among East African Herders**, Senri Ethnological Studies no. 3, Osaka.

Films

HEAD, J. & J. LYDALL (Anthropologist)
1990 *The Women Who Smile.* UK. Colour, 60 mins.

LLEWELYN-DAVIES, M.
1983 *The Women's Olamal.* UK. Colour, 120 mins.

WOODHEAD, L. & D. TURTON (Anthropologist)
1974 *The Mursi.* UK. Colour, 52 mins.
1991 *The Land is Bad.* UK. Colour, 52 mins.
1991 *Nitha.* UK. Colour, 52 mins.