

THE ‘MIRANDA’ AND THE ‘CULTURAL ARCHIVE’
From Mun (Mursi) lip-plates, to body painting and back again

Kate Nialla Fayers-Kerr

ABSTRACT. The Mun, better known as the Mursi, live between the Omo and Mago Rivers in southwest Ethiopia. They depend on cattle herding and cultivating for their livelihood. They have a rich and complex cultural tradition that involves unique ways of engaging with their environment; yet their culture is best recognised by the women’s practice of wearing plates in their lower lip, and by the male practice of ceremonial duelling or stick fighting. These well-known practices have been labelled ‘harmful traditional practices’ in a government campaign, and there is growing pressure for the Mun to abandon them. This paper aims to review this campaign by focusing on the lip-plates’ position within the wider cultural practice of body painting. Here, focusing particularly on the materials of clay and earth, body painting is discussed as a unique way of engaging with the environment, for the Mun have an earth-centred habitus which helps to explain the practice of wearing lip-plates, as well as the medicinal role they attribute to the process of body painting. Without understanding this habitus, efforts to force the Mun to modernise by abandoning their ‘harmful traditional practices’ will have repercussions that are unknown and potentially more damaging than the ‘harmful’ practices themselves.

INTRODUCTION

The Mun are a community of under 10,000 people (Turton 2011), who speak togo-a-Mun or Mursi, a Surmic language of the Nilo-Saharan language group.¹ They are also known as ‘Taama to the Bodi, Ngi-kaalabong to the Nyangatom, Murso to the Kara, Mun to the Chai, Muruz to the Daasanach and Mursi to highland agriculturalists, the government and the world at large’ (Turton and Jordomo n.d.). Based on twelve months of fieldwork living with southern Mun communities, I argue that to target Mun practices as ‘harmful’ or ‘backward’ without fully contextualising them will certainly have effects on other aspects of their traditional culture, which may end up being more harmful than the practices that are being targeted in the first place.² To illustrate this, I will examine the connection between the Mun practice of wearing clay lip-plates and body painting, building on earlier scholarly work concerning the role of Mun lip-plates,³

¹ See Bender (1976), Bender and Turton (1976), Dimmendaal (1998).

² My fieldwork was spread over eighteen months from August 2009 until November 2010, during which time I lived mainly in the village of Ulum Holi in the Biogolokare territorial section, but also in Dargush (Moizo) in the Mugjo section, and later at Gowa on the Omo River.

³ See Turton (1973, 2004) and LaTosky (2006, 2010), as well as the latter’s contribution in this collection.

and also drawing on my own research which explores the healing uses of clays and other earthy substance.

THE MIRANDA EFFECT AND CULTURAL ARCHIVES

To begin to explain the connection between the earth, lip-plates, and the art of body painting, I must first introduce two seemingly opposite concepts taken from two anthropologists working in Northeast Africa who have been hugely influential in shaping my own work: David Turton's term 'miranda' and Wendy James's term 'cultural archives'.

Turton (1973), who has been working with the Mun since 1968, explained that there are some unifying practices, such as the male practice of ceremonial duelling (*donga*) and also the female practice of wearing lip-plates (plural *dhebinya tugoiny*, singular *dbebi-a-tugoiny*), which have both become emblematic of the Mun. He described these aspects of Mun life as a 'miranda', meaning something readily visible, something to be admired and 'believed', something people are articulate about. Such things are emblematic of a group.

Turton (e.g. 1973, 1979) showed that Mun socio-political organisation is based on territorial groups and can be partially understood as based on the rules surrounding who one duels with. The significance of the *donga* along with the *dhebinya tugoiny* is their role in identity formation and the construction of solidarity. They are part of the Mun 'miranda' or political myth, following Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan's definition, according to which 'miranda' are,

the symbols of sentiment and identification in the political myth. They are those [symbols] whose function is to arouse admiration and enthusiasm, setting forth and strengthening faiths and loyalties. They not only arouse emotions indulgent to the social structure, but also heighten awareness of the sharing of these emotions by others, thereby promoting mutual identification and providing a basis for solidarity (Lasswell and Kaplan 1952:119; quoted in Turton 1973:53).

In the case of Mun communities, duelling is pivotal in creating the 'unreal permanence' of the 'ethnic group', in the eyes of both the Mun themselves and of anthropologists and outsiders (Turton 1979).

Just as Turton chose to focus his preliminary research on Mun political organisation and ceremonial duelling, the next anthropologist to conduct long-term fieldwork among the Mun, Shauna LaTosky, chose to focus on gender relations and lip-plates (Latosky 2006, 2010). Turton's and LaTosky's work has illustrated with great subtlety that both practices are key to the Mun's own sense of forging a shared identity, as well as to outsiders identifying the group.

Then there is the notion of 'cultural archives' (James 1988), which refers to something rarely expressed in discourse, largely hidden, and often only periodically apparent. James coined this term in the process of understanding the Uduk from the Blue Nile Province in southeast Sudan. She wanted to explain the fact that despite the

fluidity of social relations, 'personhood', and religious change [...] beneath the flux there are nevertheless continuities, especially of 'archival' ideas about human life which are rooted in a longer history and shared across a wider region than is immediately apparent (James 1988:xvi).

James goes on to say that,

[i]n different ways, the evidence suggests that sets of vernacular cultural elements, whether or not embodied in a surviving language, can persist at a partly hidden level to a surprising degree, while the visible features of social practice and cultural discourse can accommodate themselves to a prevailing lingua franca, dominant religion, and the regional demands of political and economic life (James 1988:5).

In order to illustrate her point, James differentiates *connaissance* from *savoir*. While the term 'connaissance' is a noun, meaning knowledge of the sort that can be verbalised easily, 'savoir' can be used as a verb and means knowing as well as a form of wisdom, 'a fundamental knowledge of the world and the self which lies partly hidden in the "archive" of their [the Uduk's] culture' (James 1988:3).

It is this difference between *connaissance* and *savoir* that I would like to highlight to help understand the relationship between different Mun practices. One can see lip-plates from the perspective of *connaissance* or the 'miranda', yet the wearing of lip-plates also ties into a rich tapestry of shared and differentiated cultural practices, including body painting, that are less easily verbalised and expressed in the sense of *savoir*. I now turn to these 'archival' practices.

BEYOND THE SOCIAL SKIN

The Mun have complex medical practices involving earthy substances. Their medical tradition predominantly centres on the application of clays, rather than the ingesting of medicines. I became interested in body painting because of ethnographic clues that revealed how people who paint themselves around the world appreciate the health benefits of body art. Yet, the relationship between body painting and its healing properties remains largely un-remarked upon, or unelaborated in the anthropological literature.⁴

⁴ See, however, Faris (1972), Munn (1973), McCallum (1996).

Therefore, I seek to understand the connection between Mun body painting and health in order to provide a medical ethnography of body art.

As I quickly learned, the Mun do practise body art for the treatment and prevention of illness. Upon arriving among the Mun, I was told, ‘Huli bhaka dhebi, mutan garrasso, engerresso’, meaning that when one anoints with clay, disease will end, for disease is afraid of clay. However, while explanations of the healing uses of clays generally state that people use clays to heal because they are potent (*barari*) and that it is customary (*a dami*) to do so, my questioning did not reveal how body art made people healthy. As Michael O’Hanlon (1992) notes, one must also examine practice and materially informed discourse, rather solely relying on what is verbalised. Focusing on the Mun practice and materially informed body art involves assessing the relationship between the environment, earthy substances and bodily health. This requires an ecologically grounded approach to health. Such an approach provides the necessary framework to go beyond the concept of the ‘social skin’ (Turner 1980), i.e. to go beyond the purely socio-cultural aspects of body painting to examine instead body painting within a wider ecological context.

This ecological context ties in to approaches such as that of David Wengrow, who suggests that body decoration among the Neolithic pastoralists of central Sudan provides a ‘mobile, body-centred *habitus* [...] accounting for the concomitant lack of investment in static, bounded environments for dwelling and socialisation’ (2003:133; italics in the original). Pierre Bourdieu clearly appreciated that ‘the structures constitutive of one’s particular type of environment [...] produce [one’s] *habitus*’ (1977:72; italics in the original). The notion of habitus is useful for explaining how socio-cultural practices and bodily ways of knowing develop through an interaction with one’s environment. Medical anthropology, human ecology and epidemiology recognise that how one interacts with one’s environment has huge implications for one’s health and well-being, as does Mary Douglas in her seminal anthropological book “Purity and danger” (1966). While Bourdieu examined the environment of built structures, particularly the house and material conditions relating to class, I will explore the daily and ritual engagements with earth. The knowledge of the materiality and distribution of certain earths and clays in the environment form what I call a ‘healing habitus’, which draws on the concept of the ‘body ecologic’ from medical anthropology.⁵ This habitus involves ‘dispositions’ and ‘principles of regulated improvisation’ through which the Mun learn to look after their bodies, protect them from the sun and protect them from malignant forces in the environment, including diseases. Much as Bourdieu suggests that one’s habitus is ‘laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing’ (1977:81), my own reflections on an earth-centred healing habitus among the Mun grew out of observations made among Mun children, who were learning to deal with earth.

⁵ See Hsu (1999, 2007, 2009) and Rittersmith (2009).

FIRST IMPRESSIONS: DAILY EXPERIENCES WITH EARTHY SUBSTANCES

In my first few weeks of fieldwork a three-year-old boy asked me to escort him into the bushes so that he could defecate. While the boy was behind a bush he called out to me many times. He was afraid I would leave him in the bushes, and he wanted to make sure that I was still waiting for him. When he had finished, I wondered how he would clean himself; usually adults used a soft leaf. He jumped on to the path, pleased to see me still waiting. I turned to walk back to the village. 'Wait!' he exclaimed. He had remembered something. He sat on the dusty path, legs horizontal in front of him, and then dragged his bare bottom across the earth. Subsequently I have seen many mothers doing the same thing with the more robust babies, and toddlers. The earth and the immediate surroundings are immensely malleable and cleansing for those who know how to use it in this way. By focusing on the daily relationship with earth it became clear that earth is being engaged with everywhere: in childhood play, in daily cleansing of the body, in agricultural processes, and in body decoration. Daily intimacy with all forms of earth is central in the Mun's everyday life.

Spending much of my early fieldwork with small children, I observed the multiple and ingenious ways in which they played and learnt to deal with the earth and other earth-like substances around them. Much as Edward Evans-Pritchard made famous the way Nuer boys moulded mud into bulls and oxen, Mun children similarly use mud for child's play. It is a common sight to come across a group of children playing with ash, mud or dung, either becoming coated in the substances accidentally, or through experimental anointing. Groups of boys, while out with their cattle, may come across an area bountiful in red ochre (*bugê*) or a chalky outcrop (*bulkai*), which they then sample by anointing themselves and each other. It is common when walking along a path to see traces of people's handling of earthy substances; one may find a rock covered with ochre rubbings, or lumps of chalk strewn across a path where some boys had gathered to anoint themselves.

In other cases, adults deliberately teach children to anoint. It is common to observe adults telling young boys to do so with moistened mud. The boys anoint themselves with mud on the torso, back and legs, and then drag their fingers through the mud to form vertical stripes to prevent the mud from cracking as it dries. The reason given for this is usually that they want to protect themselves from the sun while they are out with the cattle all day.

Similarly it is common to find little children wandering around with thoughtfully applied patterns of dung on their body; this is typically an indication that a parent, grandparent or sibling has applied it for them. After a child has defecated in a messy way his or her mother usually cleans the child with a semi-dried dung ball; if she feels inspired, she may elaborate with decorative patterns and sit back and enjoy watching her pretty child. These examples seem to illustrate the loving, thoughtful and playful attentions through which children are integrated into and accustomed to an earth-centred

habitus. This habitus also has healing implications, since it is expressed in the multiplicity and complexity of Mun healing rituals, as I shall now examine.

EARTH IN PREVENTIVE AND CURATIVE HEALING PRACTICES

Individual healing rites are carried out by healing women (plural *ngerrêa*, singular *ngerrê*) who are sought out in the evenings to treat people with symptoms of poor health.⁶ ‘Shhh! Shhh! Shhh!’ is the sound a *ngerrê* makes as she runs her hands over the body, an act which the Mun say removes anything problematic. ‘Pat! Pat! Pat!’ go her hands on the earth as she coaxes what she seems to have pulled from the body into a little pile of earth in front of her. For the *ngerrê*, earth, ash and dung are key substances which absorb and disperse malevolent forces that have gathered in the body.

Thus the earth is believed to absorb malevolent forces, but earthy substances can also disguise. Once a young girl returned from the water with dung around her mouth and a layer of ash on top of this. When I asked her why she had done this she said she had eaten meat, so before going to fetch water she needed to paint herself or else *kido* would ‘hit’ her.⁷ Since there are particularly dangerous times and situations when water sites should be avoided,⁸ the young girl had taken the precaution of disguising the smell of the meat, fearing the *kido* would be attracted to this smell. On another occasion, an elderly Juhai man, thought to be suffering from the effects of *kido*, held a healing ceremony at which he anointed his family, neighbours and himself with white clay and then with the blood of a sacrificed cow. His sister’s son then took a bowlful of this blood to the river, and after an invocation to all the local rivers he threw the bowl of blood into the riverbed. The case of *kido* is very much in line with Edward Green’s ideas on “Indigenous theories of contagion” (1999), since water is a place of contamination and the spreading of infection, particularly through open wounds and fresh blood. The Mun believe that clay, dung, earth and ash can clean, absorb and disguise. Similarly Western science is beginning to publish data on the therapeutic qualities of certain clays as an alternative to antibiotics, highlighting their antibacterial potential.⁹

Things are perhaps less clear when it comes to the spirit world. It is routine for a kinsman who has returned from a long journey to anoint the forehead of a relative. This is done to prevent potentially malevolent spirits of the dead ancestors (*mênênga*)

⁶ In addition, surgery on wounds and injuries is by performed by men called ‘nani’.

⁷ The term ‘kido’ literally means stream or small river, but it is also used to refer to something that hides in the water and causes illness. *Ngerrêa* usually treat *kido* by applying only pink and green clays, since these are thought to be the colours of *kido*. The *kido* are allegedly coaxed out of the body with the help of these clays and then thrown back into the riverbed.

⁸ For example, one should not visit the water during menstruation, with an open wound, or after giving birth.

⁹ See Williams and Haydel (2010), Williams, Haydel, and Ferrell (2009), Williams *et al.* (2008), and Williams *et al.* (2011).

from 'hitting' loved ones and making them ill. A grandmother, for example, visiting her daughter and grandchildren, will collect ash from the hearth, throw a little to the *mênênnga*, then anoint herself by dragging her ash-coated fingertips vertically down her forehead, and then repeat the action on the forehead of her relative. What is important is not the aesthetic product but the act of anointing, the process of touching even if it leaves no visible trace. Evans-Pritchard notes a similar practice among the Nuer:

[W]hen ashes are ritually rubbed on persons the meaning which fits the action best is unity, solidarity, or identification, the expression of the idea of 'I am with you', as when, for example, before initiation a boy's father, maternal uncle, and family's master of ceremonies rubs (*buk*) his forehead with ashes, uttering invocation, or when a man returns from a long journey and his father rubs ashes on his forehead (Evans-Pritchard 1956:262).

This idea of enacting unity, identification, or solidarity between people, via the medium of ash, illustrates the centrality of earthy substances in Mun daily and ritual practices.

There are also concealed clay pits that are so sacred that only 'owners' or 'custodians' (*e'wu*) have the right to visit them. On one occasion, I was invited to such a site, but my host was concerned that the clay might not recognise him as an *e'wu*, 'hit' him and make him ill as a result. Therefore, he prepared for the visit by bringing along some clay from a previous visit, and told me that the clay in the ground would recognise the clay in his pocket and would therefore not strike us. The notion of clay recognising itself is an indication of the consubstantiality between earth and people that the Mun understand, and which is at the heart of their medical system.

This consubstantiality with and knowledge of the environment is part of the healing habitus that younger men and boys engage in as they move regularly over the land. They can hardly pass a clay pit or outcrop of pigmented soil without applying these substances to their skin. Indeed, throughout the landscape there are places where the clay or pigments in the earth appeal to the Mun in unique ways. When a Westerner visits a place of beauty or religious significance it may inspire a reflection or prayer, or perhaps one simply takes a photograph. However, the Mun get their hands into the site itself, and rub and anoint themselves with its content, literally embodying the earth and the sacred site and thus in a way blurring the boundary between themselves and the land.

Clay is also central at an important communal healing ceremony, called 'rounding up the people' (*zuo lama*), or, more broadly, 'rounding up the cattle' (*bio lama*). This is a ceremony led by a member of the family of the ritual priest (*kômoru*) to protect and heal the community and cattle from disease. At such ceremonies taking place at Ulum Holi, in which I participated many times, the Biogolokare community use grey or brown clay (*dbebi-a-gidanga*), which they say protects those anointed from diseases. The word 'gidanga' can also be translated as 'dirty' or 'contaminated'; however, in certain families it is also said to be the favourite colour of *tummo*, a larger force which Turton translates as 'the sky' or 'God' (1973:252). This 'dirty' clay, if applied to the skin, is said to frighten away existing diseases or prevent them from striking the persons anointed. Perhaps it

is because of the value placed on ‘dirt’ that the member of the priestly family presiding over this ceremony does not wash with water for the duration of the *bio lama*. During the ceremony, the ‘dirty’ clay is applied to the entire community for three days, morning and evening. On the fourth and final day, the entire community ‘wash’ (*tonyo*) their bodies by anointing themselves with white clay. This ceremony is intended to be both preventive and curative: healthy people reinforce their vitality, and any sickness in the community is carried away ‘downstream’ or ‘underground’. People are concerned that everyone should take part, with friends and loved ones waking each other up before sunrise to make sure they have the time to be anointed. These collective painting ceremonies left me with the impression of a mass inoculation.

Much painting occurs for health reasons when people annually migrate to the Omo River to cultivate lands exposed by the retreating floods. The Mun see this as vital for their survival,¹⁰ yet the Omo is historically also associated with disease and epidemics, both human and bovine. Ritually powerful families attempt to cleanse the Omo of disease and predators such as crocodiles by throwing clay into the water along with the faeces of hyenas, lions and leopards. At Gowa, a place on the Omo, a ritually potent clan called Juhai also performs protective ceremonies in order to prevent diseases and epidemics from entering the village. One such ceremony, like the *bio lama*, involved three nights of anointing with black clay in the morning and evening, and then, on the fourth day, anointing with white clay to ‘wash’ (*tonyo*) the community. In the tradition of the Juhai family all the villagers anointed themselves on top of the black clay with a red stripe of ochre down the right side of the face and arm.¹¹ On the first few nights of this ceremony, after all the men, women and children in the village had been anointed, the master of the ceremony took the black clay and poured it over key pathways leading out of the village to prevent diseases from entering the community along these routes. This idea of infection being brought into the village by new arrivals and along paths recalls the work of Harriet Ngubane (1977). Clay is seen by the Mun as offering a vital avenue for negotiating external threats by channelling the positive qualities that they connect with the earth and by using these qualities for the benefit of the entire community.

HISTORICAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXTUALISATION OF EARTH

Turton makes several references to the significance of the soil in Mun religious practices. Discussing the Mun priesthood, he writes, that ‘their role is [...] characterised by the performance of public rituals to bring rain, to protect men, cattle and crops from disease, to ward off threatened attacks from other tribes, to safeguard the fertil-

¹⁰ Cf. Turton (1973, 1975, 1978, 1980a, b, 1986, 1987, 2005, 2011).

¹¹ Certain clays and styles of applying these clays to the body are family or clan specific. Since the ceremony described occurred in a Juhai area, all members of the community followed the Juhai anointing style, even non-Juhai families.

ity of the soil, of men and of the cattle' (1973:252; emphasis added). In all of this Turton illustrates that the *kômoru* has a mediating role between the Mun and the larger force of *tummo* (1973:252).

Turton's work on the role of the *kômoru* ties in with Evans-Pritchard's (1940, 1956) account of the leopard-skin priest (*kuaar twac*). However, less well-known is the fact that the Nuer priest is more typically referred to by the Nuer as, '*kuaar moun*, priest of the earth, the word *mun* (gen. *moun*) meaning "earth" in the sense of "soil"' (Evans-Pritchard 1956:291; italics in the original). The leopard-skin title is taken only from his 'badge' whereas the earth title is derived from his symbolic association with the earth. Douglas Johnson, writing about the institution of Nuer priests years later, refers to the leopard-skin priest as 'the earth-master' (1995), and, building on the work of Turton, my own research on the role of the *kômoru* suggests that the same title could apply to the Mun priesthood. The fact that in a related Nilo-Saharan language, such as Nuer, 'mun' or 'moun' refers to earth, is intriguing since this is also the name currently used by the Mun to refer to themselves.

Earth plays a major role in a Mun foundation myth or 'fairy-tale':

Initially in Bha Munoiny there were no men, only women.¹² One day a woman found a boy in a boat or honey barrel floating on a river. She hid the boy in her house and when he was older he made her pregnant. The pregnancy she could not hide, and when the baby arrived the other women started to ask her many questions. They wanted to know how she got such a thing growing in her stomach. She answered that she had eaten the mud of a *bangadhi* [termite mound] and inserted *gususi* [type of biting ants] into her vagina. The neighbouring women all tried to reproduce the same effects using the mud of a termite mound and ants, but to no avail. So, one day while the woman was away from her hut, the other women decided to investigate, and they found a man. In exchange for food, the man agreed to give each woman a baby.¹³

Earth-eating or geophagy was not the ultimate cause of pregnancy in this story, but the association between earth and fertility is so strong that the women believed eating earth could give them a child. Indeed the relationship between fertility and geophagy is common throughout the world.¹⁴ However, the Mun today give a more conventional account of procreation occurring between man and woman, and they do not take this story literally. Taken as part of their 'cultural archive', however, this story can be appreciated in terms of the links it makes between earth and fertility.

Such links between earth and fertility resurface in the practice of wearing lip-plates, which are inserted into a woman's pierced and stretched lower lip. Called 'clay of

¹² Bha Munoiny is the name with which the Mun refer to the area they live in.

¹³ Turton first informed me of this 'fairy-tale', as he refers to it, during the Christmas of 2009. During my 2010 fieldwork, my informants recounted this story with much humour. For comparable tales from the closely related Murle group in South Sudan, see Arensen (1992) and James (1979).

¹⁴ See Abrahams and Parsons (1996), Wiley and Katz (1998), Knudsen (2002), and Clack (2007).

the mouth' (*dhebi-a-tugoiny*), they are usually made of a specific soil (*bawadai*), although occasionally a woman may wear a wooden plate. Traditionally a Mun girl begins to stretch her lip at puberty, wearing her lip-plate to dances. Once her lip is fully stretched, a girl is defined as 'sexually mature' (LaTosky 2006:385). The lip-plate is a symbol of womanhood, '[t]ied tightly to fertility and eligibility for marriage' (LaTosky 2006:385), and worn particularly while serving food to one's husband and milking the cattle. Because of their association with fertility the clay lip-plates can be seen as a continuation of the complex relationship between the Mun and the earth. The lip-plates embody, in a sense, the fertility of womanhood and the earth, as well as the connection between the two. The women, by wearing 'earth' in their lips, literally wear their fertility where it is most visible.

Taking all of this into consideration, it is little wonder that the Mun words for 'to eat' (*ama*, *bhaka*) have also been translated as 'to anoint' (Turton, Yigezu, and Olibui 2008:25, 35). Thus a more accurate and literal translation of the sentence 'I anoint with clay' would be 'I eat clay'. The word 'bhaka' also means 'to live' and can be used as a transitive verb (Turton, June 2011, personal communication). A literal translation of 'kabhaga Alaka' would therefore not be 'I live at Alaka' but 'I eat Alaka' – much as one might say 'kabhaga achuck' or 'I eat meat'. Therefore, linguistically the Mun also appear to be acknowledging their consubstantiality with earth and with place.

With this in mind, it is striking what Evans-Pritchard noted with respect to the Nuer:

[S]ometimes men who intend to leave the tribe of their birth to settle permanently in another tribe take with them some earth of their country and drink it in a solution of water, slowly adding to each dose a greater amount of soil from their new country, thus gently breaking mythical ties with the old and building up mythical ties with the new (Evans-Pritchard 1956:120).

Considering the references in Mun myth to geophagy and the way that the Mun call anointing themselves with clay 'eating' clay, I find the practice mentioned by Evans-Pritchard highly evocative. It supports the idea that, in order to understand Mun conceptions of personhood, health and wellness, one must examine the way they use earth to reinforce, rebuild, and repair their bodies.

CONCLUSION

All the aforementioned links between earth and health, earth and fertility, and earth and cosmology have hopefully shown that body-painting is about more than just aesthetics or 'backward' traditions. I have suggested that the practice of body-painting is linked to other traditional customs, such as the role of the ritual priest, the wearing of lip-plates and the power that is associated with the earth and the land. Therefore, one

cannot view government efforts to ban 'harmful traditional practices' in isolation from related, inter-connected practices such as body painting. The Mun custom of piercing the lower lip is deeply embedded in their mythology, religion and cosmology, as well as in their notions of well-being and fertility.

Forced modernisation, either by well-meaning national or international non governmental organisations (NGOs) or by the current Ethiopian government, in the form of lists of 'harmful' or 'backward' traditional practices will not transform the Mun in accordance with the state's ideals of modernity without causing more problems than are solved. As Turton has noted, the Mun 'have been "localised", by being drawn into the "spatial practices" of the Ethiopian state, and "marginalised", by becoming dependent on values, norms and technologies which lie beyond their own means of production and control' (2005:258). This is not to say that the Mun should remain culturally 'untouched' by modernity or constitute a living museum for anthropologists or tourists.¹⁵ Local authorities need not worry that people like the Mun will fail to change and keep pace with a modernising Ethiopia. Change and transformation are a part of all cultures, and the Mun are, in their own way, learning to integrate into the Ethiopian state, but this must happen on their own terms, for how change occurs is culturally, historically and contextually specific. As LaTosky notes, Mun women 'connect their dangling lips to everything from aesthetics and ethnicity to a world of expanding capitalism and change' (2006:384). The Mun have always been 'modernising' themselves, adding to their traditions, borrowing from neighbours and incorporating other people and ideas into their culture.

To understand the significance of lip-plates requires an appreciation of the fact that they are part of the 'miranda' features of Mun culture, and are aspects of *connaissance*. Yet their meaning is also deeply rooted in a vital reservoir of 'cultural archives', or aspects of *savoir*. James' concept of 'cultural archives' (1988) illustrates how deep levels of continuity persist in many cultures despite seemingly dramatic adoptions of new and different traditions. A similar point is made in the contributions to the edited volume "Body arts and modernity" (Ewart and O'Hanlon 2007), which show that there are multiple ways in which people with rich body-painting traditions can integrate into a modern context. Beth Conklin (2007) explains that, while body-paint and feathers may be worn in Amazonia, this does not guarantee the continuity of 'tradition' any more than if an Amazonian wears a flamboyant and markedly Western ski-mask. It is why people wear what they wear, and how they wear it that marks an internal cultural continuity.

In short, visible changes that people have voluntarily made can actually be underpinned by much 'archival' continuity, while the appearance of continuity of the 'miranda' can equally hide fundamental cultural changes that lie beneath. If the Mun are allowed to interact with the Ethiopian state on their own terms, visible changes in their

¹⁵ See the speech by Meles Zenawi (2011), cited by Epple and Thubauville in their contribution in this collection.

culture will occur organically and with less disturbance of the 'archival' knowledge. I am thus not arguing against change, but I suggest that responsible efforts to modernise the Mun must appreciate that their own efforts to modernise will be more informed and longer lasting than any that outsiders may make.

REFERENCES

ABRAHAMAS, Peter W. and Julia A. PARSONS

1996 "Geophagy in the tropics: a literature review", *Geographical Journal* 162:63–72

ARENSEN, Jonathan. E.

1992 *Mice are men: language and society among the Murle of Sudan*. Dallas: International Museum of Cultures

BENDER, M. Lionel

1976 "Introduction", in: M. Lionel Bender (ed.), *The non-semitic languages of Ethiopia*, 1–24. East Lansing: Michigan State University

BENDER, M. Lionel and David TURTON

1976 "Mursi", in M. Lionel Bender (ed.), *The non-semitic languages of Ethiopia*, 533–561. East Lansing: Michigan State University

BOURDIEU, Pierre

1977 *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

CLACK, Timothy

2007 *Memory and the mountain: environmental relations of the Wachagga of Kilimanjaro and implications for landscape archaeology*. Oxford: Archaeopress

CONKLIN, Beth

2007 "Ski masks, veils, nose-rings and feathers: identity on the frontlines of modernity", in: Elizabeth Ewart and Michael O'Hanlon (eds.), *Body arts and modernity*, 18–35. Wantage: Sean Kingston

DIMMENDAAL, Gerrit J.

1998 "Surmic languages and cultures: an introduction", in: Gerrit J. Dimmendaal and Marco Last (eds.), *Surmic languages and cultures*, 3–33. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe.

DOUGLAS, Mary

1966 *Purity and danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge

EVANS-PRITCHARD, Edward E.

- 1940 *The Nuer: a description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
 1956 *Nuer religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

EWART, Elizabeth and Michael O'HANLON (eds.)

- 2007 *Body arts and modernity*. Wantage: Sean Kingston

FARIS, James

- 1972 *Nuba personal art*. London: Duckworth

GREEN, Edward C.

- 1999 *Indigenous theories of contagious disease*. Walnut Creek and London: Altamira Press

HSU, Elisabeth

- 1999 *The transmission of Chinese medicine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
 2007 "The biological in the culture: the five agents and the body ecologic in Chinese medicine", in: David Parkin and Stanley Ulijaszek (eds.), *Holistic anthropology: emergence and convergence*, 91–126. New York and Oxford: Berghahn
 2009 "Experiences of personhood, health and disease in China: some reflections", *Cambridge Anthropology* 29:69–84

JAMES, Wendy

- 1979 *'Kwanim Pa: the making of the Uduk people: an ethnographic study of survival in the Sudan-Ethiopian borderlands*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
 1988 *The listening ebony: moral knowledge, religion, and power among the Uduk of Sudan*. New York: Oxford University Press

JOHNSON, Douglas

- 1995 "The prophet Ngundeng and the battle of padding: prophecy, symbolism and historical evidence", in: Douglas Johnson and David Anderson (eds.), *Revealing prophets: prophecy in Eastern Africa*, 196–220. London: James Currey

KNUDSEN, Jane W.

- 2002 "Akula Udongo (earth eating habit): a social and cultural practice among Chagga women of the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro", *Indilinga: African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems* 1:19–26

LASSWELL, Harold D. and Abraham KAPLAN

- 1952 *Power and society: a framework for political inquiry*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul

LATOSKY, Shauna

- 2006 "Mursi women's lip-plates as a source of stigma and self-esteem", in: Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall (eds.), *Perils of face: essays on cultural contact, respect and self-esteem in southern Ethiopia*, 382–397. Berlin: Lit

- 2010 *The predicaments of Mursi women in a changing world*. Mainz (PhD dissertation, Johannes Gutenberg University)
- MCCALLUM, Cecilia
 1996 "The body that knows: from Cashinahua epistemology to a medical anthropology of Lowland South America", *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 10:347–372
- MUNN, Nancy D.
 1973 *Walbiri iconography: graphic representation and cultural symbolism in a central Australian society*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press
- NGUBANE, Harriet
 1977 *Body and mind in Zulu medicine: an ethnography of health and disease in Nyuswa-Zulu thought and practice*. London: Academic Press
- O'HANLON, Michael
 1992 "Unstable images and second skins: artefacts, exegesis and assessments in the New Guinea Highlands", *Man* 27:587–608
- RITTERSMITH, Ariel
 2009 "Contextualizing Chinese medicine in Singapore: microcosm and macrocosm", *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford-Online* 1:1–24
- TURNER, Terence
 1980 "The social skin", in: Jeremy Cherfas and Rodger Lewin (eds.), *Not work alone: a cross-cultural view of activities superfluous to survival*, 112–140. London: Temple Smith
- TURTON, David
 1973 *The social organisation of the Mursi: a pastoral tribe of the Lower Omo Valley, South West Ethiopia*. London (PhD dissertation, University of London, LSE)
 1975 "The relationship between oratory and the exercise of influence among the Mursi", in: Maurice Bloch (ed.), *Political language and oratory in traditional societies*, 163–184. London, New York: Academic Press
 1978 "Territorial organisation and age among the Mursi", in: Paul T.W. Baxter and Uri Almagor (eds.), *Age, generation and time: some features of East African age organisations*, 95–130. London: Hurst
 1979 "A journey made them: territorial segmentation and ethnic identity among the Mursi", in: Ladislav Holy (ed.), *Segmentary lineage systems reconsidered*, 67–92. Belfast: Queen's University
 1980a "The economics of Mursi brideswealth: a comparative perspective", in: Jean Comaroff (ed.), *The meaning of marriage payments*, 67–92. London and New York: Academic Press
 1980b "There's no such beast: cattle colour and naming among the Mursi", *Man* 15:320–338
 1986 "A problem of domination at the periphery: the Kwegu and the Mursi", in: Donald D. Donham and Wendy James (eds.), *The southern marches of imperial Ethiopia: essays in history and social anthropology*, 18–172. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

- 1987 "The Mursi and National Park development in the Lower Omo Valley", in: David Anderson and Richard Groves (eds.), *Conservation in Africa, peoples, policies and practice*, 169–186. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- 2004 "Lip-plates and 'the people who take photographs': uneasy encounters between Mursi and tourists in southern Ethiopia", *Anthropology Today* 20:3–8
- 2005 "The meaning of place in a world of movement: lessons from long term field research in southern Ethiopia", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 18:358–380
- 2011 "Wilderness, wasteland or home? Three ways of imagining the Lower Omo Valley", *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5(1):158–176

TURTON, David and Lugulointheno JORDOMO

- n.d. "Who are the Mursi?", in: Marcus Brittain and Timothy Clack (eds.), *Mursi in the making: migrations, monuments and museums*. Oxford: South Omo Research Centre

TURTON, David, Moges YIGEZU, and Olisarali OLIBUI

- 2008 *Mursi-English-Amharic dictionary*. Addis Ababa: Culture and Arts Society of Ethiopia (CASE) and Ermias Advertising

WENGROW, David

- 2003 "Landscapes of knowledge, ideoms of power: the African foundations of ancient Egyptian civilization reconsidered", in: Andrew Reid and David B. O'Connor (eds.), *Ancient Egypt in Africa*, 121–134. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

WILEY, Andrea S. and Solomon H. KATZ

- 1998 "Geophagy in pregnancy: a test of a hypothesis", *Current Anthropology* 39:532–545

WILLIAMS, Lynda B. and Shelley E. HAYDEL

- 2010 "Evaluation of the medicinal use of clay minerals as antibacterial agents", *International Geology Review* 52:745–770

WILLIAMS, Lynda B., Shelley E. HAYDEL, and Ray E. FERRELL

- 2009 "Bentonite, bandaids, and borborygmi", *Elements* 5:99–104

WILLIAMS, Lynda B., Shelley E. HAYDEL, Rosseman F. GIESE, and Dennis D. EBERL

- 2008 "Chemical and mineralogical characteristics of French green clays used for healing", *Clays and Clay Minerals* 56:437–452

WILLIAMS, Lynda B., David W. METGE, Dennis D. EBERL, Ronald W. HARVEY, Amanda G. TURNER, Panjai PRAPAIPONG, and Amisha T. PORET-PETERSON

- 2011 "What makes a natural clay antibacterial?", *Environmental Science & Technology* 45:3768–3773

