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Coping with strangers in Africa: tourism, politics and development in South-Western Ethiopia

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According to a report, made for the UK Department for International Development (DFID): “among the top 40 recipients of DFID bilateral aid, tourism is significant” (DFID, 1999: 9). However, while the tourism sector increasingly contributes to most developing countries’ GDP it does not necessarily mean that international tourists also foster microeconomic stability. Local perceptions of tourism and development often alter from the supra regional political and economic views. This article explores how tourism, as a new source of wealth, is perceived in a small scale localised community and how this view differs from the national rhetoric and practice of national development plans in Ethiopia. The paper discusses how relatively new forms of contacts give ground to emerging political institutions that begin as tentative interest groups and become protagonists in local politics. I analyse a process that I documented during a one year long anthropological fieldwork among the Mursi, a South Ethiopian pastoral society, wherein daily encounters challenged local groups’ decision making processes, compel them to form new allies, cooperate and collaborate in a different way that they practiced before.

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Introduction

Modern East African states often use non-African strangers to achieve their political agenda. Chinese and Indian multinational companies, the Western tourism industry or international NGOs are frequently in the centre of political debates on economic development, and the ambiguous political status of these foreign strangers is often exploited in exercising local politics. But this is certainly not a novel phenomenon in Africa since movement of people in the continent is nothing new (Wilson, 1979). Aside from the constant internal mobility Arab traders, Asians, white missionaries-hunters-‘explorers’ have all travelled through this part of the continent in the past circa 200 years. Their legacy is the ambiguous political status of modern immigrants, foreign workers, tourists and other strangers in East African societies.

Though the literature is wide on the issue of strangers in African societies (Berland & Rao, 2004; Levine, 1979; Nyamnjoh & Page, 2002; Rasmussen, 2004; Shack, 1979; Streck, 2004) very few attention had been paid for the most recent situation, when leisure seeking white strangers, mostly tourists, visit isolated territories in Africa and generate new political and social conditions on local level. Compare with the former colonial economic aggressiveness of the permanent white aliens in African societies the presence of tourists might seem an ephemeral incident, exercising no control over local economical resources. Therefore it would be easy to see tourists as strangers who come today and leave tomorrow, leaving no long-term political effects in the African host societies. But tourist encounters, despite their short time and fluid nature, often trigger hidden local political and power ambitions and encourage cultural reaction within the host societies.

Despite this, the circumstances, effects, and aftermaths of tourism encounters are very rarely subject of detailed anthropological and/or political studies on East Africa. The reason is that, as Hall (2003) argues in general, there is a little agreement on how tourism policies, as a new area of studies, should be analysed, since there is still no well-defined analytical and theoretical framework for these interrelated disciplines. It is surprising, given the emphasis of politicians, especially from African countries, on tourism as a means of economic development (Hall, 1996). From the 1970s most non-Western governments recognised the economic benefits in international tourism (Richter, 2009) and tried to use the tourism industry for generate economic capital. Moreover, together with the expected economic regional stability, some countries, such as Kenya, used tourism as political pawn meanwhile some political regimes, such as in the Philippines in the 1980s, suffered from the opposition who used the tourism industry for political unrest (Richter, 1992). But, whatever the direction of political use of tourism, as the travel industry expands, existing social institutions are transformed and new ones created (Harrison, 1992).

In this process tourism are regarded in low level income countries mostly as passport to development (de Kadt, 1979). But the questions, such as on what scale tourism likely to contribute most to development and what are the influences that determine the extent to which tourism can play effective development role, was only recently addressed in tourism studies (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002). As there is still no sufficient interplay between tourism studies (including anthropology and sociology) and African political research, there is also a gap in the general literature on the role of tourism in development studies and likewise in the development literature, tourism has yet to receive attention (Telfer, 2009). Concepts in development studies, such as ‘dependency’ or ‘world system’ theories, now have changed with alternative development approaches such as ‘post-development’, which has still little to offer in practice. This article aims to give a concrete example of how tourism, development

and politics are understood and practiced in a small scale East African society and how this topic can be approached from an interdisciplinary angle.

My aim is to show how the tourism industry amplifies the development of a new social identity among certain groups of the South-Ethiopian Mursi people. I focus on how leisure-seeking white people generate new local allies, and how this new form of cooperation has led to the formations of local political identities in this pastoral society. Moreover I also describe how the local population construct a political institution that can be a basis for daily contacts with aliens who arrive to visit the local people in the name of development. I show how these newly invented political identities can also be understood as resistance shield towards the outside world and how the Ethiopian national development plans not concomitant with the local practice.

First I briefly discuss how changing material conditions in East Africa are perceived by pastoral societies in general and how they made meaningful these outsider forces within their own social system. Tourism enters into this constant identity negotiation that pastoralist people undertake within their established set of values. Or rather: pastoral societies enter into monetary economy and modernisation through tourism which situation articulates the so called globalisation, modernity and development. After discussing general issues I introduce the Mursi, describe the current view and official position of the Ethiopian state on development, tourism and pastoralism in the lower Omo territory where the Mursi people live. Then I show how the Mursi invent political roles and institutions in order to communicate with outsiders and how the local population constructs a political surface that can accommodate daily encounters with aliens. My aim is to show, from an analytical perspective combining anthropology, African studies on nomadism and theoretical tourism studies, how politics organised indirectly on local level and how different it is from the multi scale political aspirations.

Given the different disciplinary fields this study intersects (anthropology, development and tourism studies, African political studies), I will not follow a well defined theoretical homogeneity. I rather accept Patrick Chabal (2009) convincing argument on the role of the theory in understanding contemporary African societies. He argues beside a rather inductive approach in the scientific quest wherein we have to comprehend what makes sense to people at the local level without prior theoretical or ideological agenda. It is an attempt to see African politics from below or rather from within. As Chabal argues on everyday politics in Africa he describes what makes sense for local people without clear political agenda and how politics 'is played out in these key areas of human existence' (Chabal, 2009: x).

The politics of strangers in East African nomadic societies

Despite the fact that tourism makes major contribution to the economies of East Africa (Foster, Hitchcock & Limo, 2000) national states are often hesitant about welcoming aliens to their region. Allowing white strangers within the boundaries of the nation state usually entails issues such as security (i.e. of tourists), foreign political influence (i.e. through development organisations), and the sovereignty of the state. Tourism has been often regarded in non-Western countries as a form of neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism, since its profit returned to the metropolitan countries (Nash, 1989; Matthews, 2003).

This political uncertainty is particularly valid if tourists travel to places where even the central governments have scarce control, therefore probably one of the most strained affairs in East

Africa happens when tourists visit the territories of nomads and pastoral people². Many pastoral societies (except the Maasai) have only recently, approximately in the last twenty years, encountered white men in greater mass number. However, from the historical experience, local pastoral groups are aware that white state officials, white travellers or other strangers are always carried the atmosphere of powerful political and economic influence and challenged the self-confidence of 'stateless' nomadic societies. But these new relationships, the short but forceful encounters of two mobile cultures (nomads and Western tourists) are the expressions of a new type of political connections wherein the power roles are often dynamically negotiated.

The East African social, political and economic situation of nomadic societies, which the recent tourism industry encounters, is a very sensitive predicament. Anthropologists and historians looked at the way how nomadic societies can adapt to the outside world but tourism was never in focus of these studies. It is common sense that no nomadic societies could ever function in isolation (Galaty, 1981; Sobania, 1991; Spencer, 1998). Especially because an economy founded on nomadism is not infrequently highly involved in markets. This is due to a one-sided and specialised production system wherein nomad units were always more interested in trade than sedentary societies (Khazanov, 1983: 202). Therefore watching the history of nomad-sedentary contacts in East Africa (Waller, 1999) it is apparent that in order to become/remain nomad it was always the question of adaptation to the outside world, to sedentary societies that close to the governing state, to the state that also control the tourism industry.

However the active trade and exchange relations, between nomads and the outside world, do not automatically entails painless political integration into the governing states and the often uneasy affairs are frequently mirrored into the nomad-tourist relationship. The tense relationship between neglected pastoral societies and central governments is characteristic in most East-African countries. Discussing modernization, tourism and development the Maasai is the most described East African pastoral society (see the studies in Spear & Waller (Eds) 1993; Potkanski 1999; Rigby 1985; Talle 1999). Despite the fact that for a long time they have been seen as the archetypical pastoral society, this is far from the truth (Spear, 1993) as one of the most important questions for many Maasai herders has been their relationship to agricultural societies. As Waller (1993) argues, the Maasai pastoral centre has defined its identity in contrast to the agro-pastoral and agricultural community. As we will see in the following the Mursi social landscape is very similar to what Waller described: a central area where people keep their cattle and rely mostly on them and there is the newly occupied area and the tourist contact zone where people rely more on agriculture and other forms of income. This pastoral centre/semi-pastoral periphery dichotomy provides a social and economic means of local identity in Maasailand as it does in Mursiland. However, the Maasai have a long history of contact not only with their close agricultural neighbours but also with European travellers, missionaries, and hunters. From the early twentieth century to the present day, Western travellers have thronged to see the Maasai (Bruner & Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, 1994) and the related Samburu (Kasfir, 1999). This pastoral society has a longer history of intercultural encounters with Europeans than any other East-African pastoral people (Akama, 2000). As Richard Waller (1993: 247) argues, the Maasai often maintained their ethnic identity in relation to alien political and economic forces.

² In general see Bruner, 2002; Galaty, 2002; Kasfir, 2002. For case studies on tourism in East African pastoralist societies see: Akama, 2002; Kratz and Pido, 2000; Ritsma and Ongaro, 2002; Talle, 1999 on the Maasai in Kenya and Tanzania, and Kasfir, 1999 on the Samburu. Abbink, 2000; Turton, 2004a on the semi pastoral groups in South Ethiopia.

The Turkana is a geographically and politically more secluded society than the Maasai. As Vigdis Broch-Due states, there is often confrontation between how the pastoral Turkana people and strangers see the outside world. The Turkana see the emerging small towns at the edge of the desert in which they live as examples of 'poverty in the making'; oases not of 'development' and 'progress' but of 'destitution' (Broch-Due, 1999: 87). Paul Spencer (1998) through the example of semi nomad Chamu people also shows the dynamic of socio-cultural change in East-African pastoral societies. Spencer argues that East-African pastoral societies are often more capable of accommodating external change than sedentary people. He emphasises how different generations engage in social mobility, modernisation, and communication with the outside world. The Nuer society also changed due to altered political circumstances, state and market structures, and long wars. Sharon Hutchinson argues that during the past six decades, most Nuer people 'have reinterpreted the symbolic and material forces of three key media of interpersonal bonding': blood, cattle, and commensality, the three powerful media of personhood and culture, are now the money, guns, and paper triad (1996: 27). Although the Nuer has incorporated money into their value system, the cash exists with the cattle and the latter still has a greater value. It is not the cattle that have been commoditised but rather commodities that have been 'cattle-ified' (Hutchinson 1996: 98).

The socio-cultural marginalization of pastoral societies in East Africa, especially in the 1980s, have resulted a new social topography of poor and prosperous (Broch-Due & Anderson, 1999). By the 1990s pastoral societies of this part of the continent became subject of two alien groups: tradition seeking tourists and development agencies. Tourists like to see marginal, excluded people because they invoke forgotten tradition for Westerners. Development agents, national and international, took the position that Eastern African pastoral production, lacking modern interventions, is insufficient, therefore, avoiding destitution they need help from the outside world. The two narratives seem analogous but they are fundamentally different. Tourists believe that traditional lifestyle is a must for survival. For development agencies nomad lifestyle will fail because it cannot cope with the wider scheme of commoditization and world economy. Therefore when Eastern African governments use international tourism as development tool it can trigger conundrum between tourists, local hosts and government officials.

Therefore tourism is, without doubt, a novel challenge for localised East African pastoral societies. The travel industry is currently one of the leading economic sectors in the world and this fact inevitably leaves its mark on local economies. Moreover, there is nothing in the political structure of tourism is written in tablets of stone: policy strategies are constantly changing in the development of the industry (Dieke, 2000). The overall macro-political and economic desires and ambitions are often neither viable nor equivalent to the local informal political practices. Local people and state ideologists often have a dichotomous understanding of the same issues. On the micro-level, meetings with Western tourists are often a new political experience for many nomads. In the eyes of locally bounded small-scale nomadic societies, tourists often represent the political power associated with material wealth and free mobility over the boundaries of the nation state that controls the nomads. Therefore tourists and nomads have a unique and ambivalent relationship in the post-colonial aftermath that inevitably generates new forms of political behaviour and allies within the host societies. Moreover, as mentioned above, the nomad terrains often uncontrolled by central governments and the aggressive mobility of Western tourists regularly cause logistical dilemma for local governments.

Because of these novel intercultural situations everyday politics has a certain dynamic that differ from the colonial and early post-colonial administrative protocols. The pastoral

societies' encounters with Western tourists do not follow an established political etiquette. It is still not possible to conclude the consequences of this relationship, as most pastoral terrains have only become mass tourist sites in the past 20 years. Tourists rarely spend a lot of time in nomad societies' territories, generally only viewing them from the road. Firm contact zones evolve, usually along the road systems that originally were produced by settled, governing societies into nomad terrains. Roads, emerging settled camps have thus become the trajectories of cultural contact, social change and material exchange; they are symbols of development and the carriers of new political ideas. Tourism enters into an ongoing political discussion between settled and nomads where well identifiable physical contact zones give ground to communication. Understanding tourism encounters through the spatial (Kopytoff 1987) or contact-zone (Bruner, 2005) model inevitably advocates a limited and fragmentary social change in the host societies. The contact zone does not always influence the whole society. The consequences of the tourism industry does not have a definitive and universal effect on local peoples' everyday politics, as these encounters provoke moral dilemmas in certain groups within the same group and might generate different reactions in the entire society. Tourism does not, yet, generalise normative political behaviours in the whole society.

Traditional Mursi politics

As my aim here is to show how tourism, a fairly recent cultural and political force, causes political changes among the Mursi, a certain East African pastoral society, I will first describe the 'traditional' Mursi political and social organisation. I understand 'traditional' lifestyle as Spencer defined it when he talked about the pastoral Chamu. According to him tradition is the 'meaningful life style to which pastoralists remain committed – a concept that yields guiding principles when men and women are faced with uncertainty' (Spencer, 1998: 2). Keeping this in my mind I use an early description of Mursi political organisation written by David Turton, who has spent a considerable time among the Mursi since the end of the 1960s. Then and now the political life of the Mursi is connected to the topography of Mursiland and the peoples' economic, social and mobility patterns. The people's yearly mobility patterns, political gatherings and their related rituals are all connected to the geographical features of the land.

The Mursi whose population is between eight and ten thousand live in a 2,000 km² territory (see Figure 1) bordered on the west and the south by the Omo River, and on the east by the Mago River. There is no natural north border, as it was closed by the Bodi people. Although the highest point in Mursiland is over 1,000 metres above sea level, most people live between 500 and 700 meters above sea level, between the Omo River and the higher open grassland areas. About 60 percent of the people's livelihood relies on agricultural products and the rest on animal husbandry. There are two wet seasons, when the rain fills many dry riverbeds: the first is between March and May and the second between October and November. At other times, the people graze their livestock and grow sorghum on the higher lands.



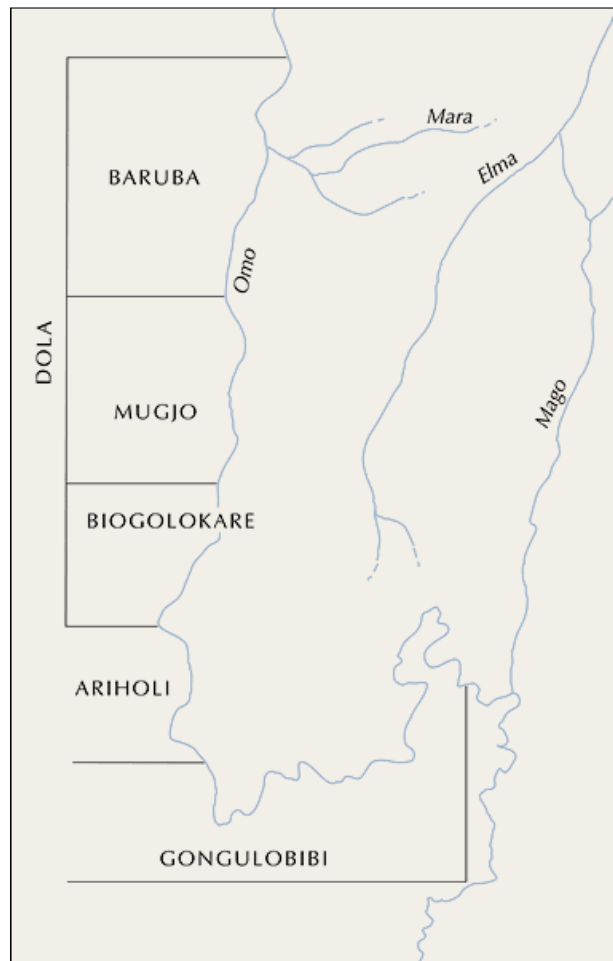
1. Figure: A map of the Lower Omo Valley

Source: <http://www.mursi.org>

The Mursi people practice two types of farming: flood retreat along the Omo River and rain-fed shifting cultivation. The third main subsistence activity is animal husbandry, which generally involves raising cattle. The Mursi regard their herds of cattle as the most important things they own and it is a primary economic and cultural aim to keep as many of these animals as possible.

Mursiland is divided into five major locales organised into imagined territorial sections (*bhuronyaga*) (see Figure 2): *Mara (Baruba)*, *Mugjo*, *Biogolokare*, *Ariholi* and *Gongulobibi*

(Turton, 1979). Each geographical section, stretching horizontally from the Omo River up to the grassland, contains all of the natural resources that allow the community to occupy the given section: the Omo River and its banks (for cultivation) and its forests, and the bushbelt and higher grasslands (for grazing). Each person belongs to one of these imagined territorial sections, which not only contributes to their identity within the Mursi society, but also identifies their yearly movements and mobility patterns. These different geographical features cause a transhumance that does not allow the population to stay in one place all year (Turton, 1973) and also demarcates the communities' time, work and mobility structure. Between May and August the population live in the central settlements located in the higher grasslands, but they abandon these units in September. Then the cultivation works start along the Omo River, during which time more people move down to the river while most of the men stay with the cattle in the higher pasture area. This situation lasts until the main rains come in March and April when the Omo starts to flood than later to recede (Turton, 1985).



2. Figure: Local groups (bhuronyaga) of the Mursi

Source: www.mursi.org

Aside from the territorial divisions, the male part of the society is divided into age groups (Turton, 1978). Each Mursi male belongs to one of the age grades that determine behaviours, social interactions and everyday routines. The first two grades, the *changalay* and the *dhongai*, contain Mursi children from birth until their mid-teens, when they move into the *teru* grade, where they stay until their late twenties. The *teru* live together in cattle camps, take care of their animals, court unmarried girls, and prepare themselves for stick fights. Once

a man is married, they enter into the *roro* group, while the elderly members of the society are known as the *bara*.

The most important political events in Mursi life are the public meetings. These are the times for making group decisions. The married male population in a given area gathers together and listens to opinions about the topics in question. There is no leader or political chief, in Western sense, in the Mursi society, but the meetings are usually concluded with words from one of the *bara* or a respected *roro*. There are influential men (*jalabai*) in the community who are respected for their oratorical and debating skills (Turton, 1973), but their authority is conferred according to their own abilities and not by a set of rules. There are two Mursi priests (*komoru*), one in *Mako* in the northern territory and another in *Kurum* in the south. Although they have no political power, their advice is sought at times, especially in regard to wars and when the wellbeing of the community is in question.

Changing politics: relating to the state

David Turton has had the opportunity to witness how the Mursi society has shaped its political relationships with the rest of the world over the past 40 years. He argues that when he began his study, most Mursi people perceived ‘Themselves as occupying a place that was physically and morally central in relation to the outside world’; however, in recent years, most Mursi have come to see the ‘Centre slipping away from them and, worse still, they have no idea where it is now located’ (Turton, 2004b: 275). This change in self-perception on a societal and an individual level is due to several external factors. One is undoubtedly the sudden appearance of Western tourists in Mursiland; however, the Mursi has also faced growing political pressure (Turton, 2003) and constricted land space (Turton, 1979). These circumstances have combined to engender the Mursi peoples’ view of themselves ‘As a small, *localized*, poor, technologically backward and relatively powerless group living in the margins of the Ethiopian state’ (Turton, 2004b).

In the early 1980s, there was one of the most important migrations in Mursi history, when a group of people made a journey northeast from their former territory in search of ‘cool ground’ (Turton, 1985). This movement was a response to growing pressure upon their water supplies and available arable land, namely a need for subsistence. This migration also taught the Mursi that they could not expand their territory. Now they cannot move freely nor occupy neighbouring land belonging to another ethnic group. Interethnic boundaries are closed and not only neighbouring groups, but also the Ethiopian government, will stop the Mursi in an attempt to inhabit more land. Before the 1990s, previous to the collapse of the Mengistu regime, the Mursi people regarded their political position as unimportant to the central Ethiopian government, and this allowed them to maintain a relatively high level of political and economic autonomy (Turton, 1973). Most of the people had not engaged in any form of administrative contact with the state or with any other outsider. When they were suddenly brought into contact with the government and encountered Western tourists in large numbers, they came to realise that their strategy of disengagement was not only out-dated but also counterproductive (Turton, 2004b).

The current Ethiopian Federal Ethnic Government began to remap the country when they obtained power in 1991 (Turton, 2006). This attempt to establish ‘A fixed ethno-territorial grid on populations with a long history of mobility’ (Turton, 2006: 14) inevitably increased interethnic tensions. The Mursi realised that their itinerancy and occupation of new lands, their incessant pursuit of the ideal ‘land of dreams’ was unachievable. As Turton (2004b)

argues, they now believe that their ‘land has shrunk’ and they are being localised by the activities of the nation state.

On 25 January 2011, Meles Zenawi, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, gave a public speech³ in the town of Jinka, a small but important market town in the lower Omo region. This place is one of the farthest towns from the topographically central Addis Ababa. The Prime Minister spoke about how the government plans to develop this political and cultural fringe territory. The first part of the speech emphasised that the previous government had not paid enough attention to the pastoral people of the territory. Zenawi argued that the present administration was determined to develop the lower Omo territory, to elevate it from a backward to a modern society and give the pastoral people the education and the health system they need, as without them they will remain a ‘tourist attraction’. Zenawi outlined the government’s plans to develop an irrigation system, establish a 150,000 hectare sugarcane plantation, build new roads, and finish the Gibe III hydroelectric dam on the upper Omo River⁴.

The speech implicitly labelled the traditional (pastoral) way of life as financially insufficient (poor). It is clear from the words that pastoralism in this area does not fit into the ‘national project’. The ‘civilized state’ will ‘develop’ the ‘backward pastoralist’ society, providing them with a road system and irrigation. However the potential complications in this endeavour, according to the Prime Minister, are the ‘best friends of backwardness and poverty’: the Western development agencies, researchers and scholars who have criticised the government’s plans⁵. Zenawi argued that these people want to hold back ‘development’ and maintain the locals as tourist attractions. Labelling all local-transnational connections as harmful because they enable local people to challenge state policy is definitively a notable legitimising device for state policy. The concepts of tourism, development and the ‘local-alien’ distinction were picked up and employed clearly for current state purposes. Zenawi labelled the western tourism industry as a passive onlooker of a transnational plot against the modern nation-building. In this re-moralising political discourse, tourism appears as part of a game played by Western agents to the detriment of state policies. However, when the Ethiopian government promotes the country for foreign tourists the traditional lifestyle of the people in the Lower Omo Valley appear as one of the main assets.

³ Access to the speech: <http://www.mursi.org/news-items/huge-irrigation-scheme-planned-for-the-lower-omo-valley>

⁴<http://www.addisfortune.com/Waterworks%20Enterprise%20Begins%20Surveying%20for%20New%20Sugar%20Dev%E2%80%99t.htm>

⁵ The African Resource Working Group (ARWG, 2008) and several international NGOs, including International Rivers, USAID, and Survival International have all criticised the Gibe III Hydroelectric Dam project (see a summary of reports at <http://www.mursi.org/news-items/huge-irrigation-scheme-planned-for-the-lower-omo-valley>). The World Bank and the European Investment Bank have both refused to be involved in the project. These organisations argue that the dam will not provide enough water for flood retreat cultivation and will keep back fertile soil deposits for the people living along the lower Omo, who will not be able to pursue the river flood cultivation which provides around 60 percent of their economy. The organisations believe that any change in the level of the Omo River may lead to the evaporation of Lake Turkana. They argue that the Gibe III project will harm 500,000 people, including the Mursi, Bodi, Suri, Kwegu, Karo, Nyangatom, Dassanetch, Hamar and Turkana people in the lower part of the river, and those living around Lake Turkana in Kenya.

Tourism in the lower Omo Valley

The Ethiopian government began to market the country to tourists in the 1980s, but it was not until the end of the socialist Derg regime of Haile Mariam, in 1992, that tourism improved. A reasonably free market economy and international promotion is necessary for a country's tourism industry to develop: this can hardly evolve under a closed communist regime. In the late 1990s, Western-style tourism marketing began to operate in the country and alongside the 'Historic Route' in North Ethiopia, the concept of the 'Tribal South' emerged. The Ethiopian National Tourism Organisation and other private companies set up travel itineraries wherein within ten or fourteen days tourists could visit the northern tourist sites followed by a trip to southern Ethiopia to visit the local people there. Although Ethiopian Airlines had operated scheduled flights to Jinka from the 1950s, tourists only began to benefit from this service four decades later. In 2004 in Barcelona, Yusuf Abdullahi Sukkar (2004) the then Ethiopia's Commissioner of Tourism outlined the importances of tourism sector in the country's economy. He acknowledged that at that time tourism sector does not represent major factor in the gross Ethiopian economy (only 2% in 2004) however the country wants to increase this number. He argues that Ethiopia perceives tourism as an export economy and wishes to develop the necessary infrastructure for future tourism investments. For the new Ethiopian millennium, which was in 2007 according to the Western Calendar, the Government started a worldwide market campaign to attract tourists for the celebrations. Mohamud Dirir, Ethiopia's current Culture and Tourism Minister urges private sector investments in the tourism sector and got World Bank loans for developing sustainable tourism in Ethiopia (Net News Publisher, 2008; World Bank, 2011). By 2020 Ethiopia wants to attract 1 million tourists per year (Net News Publisher, 2010) and watching the Ethiopian tour operators' websites⁶ the 'Tribal South', as they label the Lower Omo Valley, is one of the most important attractions on their offer.

The bridge over the Mago River was built in the first half of the 1980s, which made a huge impact on the Mursi-alien relationship. The Mursi was the only ethnic group that travellers to Jinka were able to visit: their primary interest in doing so was to see the females who wore large lip plates. After a one-hour drive, descending from a high plateau, the tourists arrive at the checkpoint established by the Ethiopian Government and the Mago National Park to provide armed guards for every car that enters Mursiland. They are then taken to the Mago Bridge, which is the location of the first Mursi settlements. Encounters between the Mursi and their visitors have always been uneasy. To the tourists, the Mursi appear to be a tribe of wild men, naked and wielding Kalashnikovs, and women wearing enormous lip-plates. The perceived violence of the Mursi, who do not see the harm in touching them, is further emphasised by the guides. Every morning, the Mursi who live in the villages visited by the tourists prepare themselves for their encounters with these outsiders. They conform to the tourists' expectations: the women painting and presenting themselves for the tourists.

Tourists were annoyed by the Mursi peoples' behaviour, by the 'aggressive manner', by the 'too touchy', but mainly Mursi peoples' 'too commercial' attitude, as when they ask them to pose for photos and the Mursi request a higher price for doing so than they have been offered. I often saw angry tourists following the Mursi people around and waving bank notes at them. However, the Mursi people usually continued to refuse the cash. The tourists then often put the money on the ground and left. With the help of one of the drivers or the guides, the negotiation continued until the tourists paid the required sum, or the original offer was

⁶ See: www.tourismethiopia.org; www.abysiniantours.com; www.getts.com.et; www.greenlandethiopia.com/eng.

accepted by the Mursi. There were cases when the economic transaction went smoothly, but there was generally a dispute. Some tourists became so riled that they returned to their car, walked around without taking any pictures, or asked their guide to leave the village. However, the Mursi were also disappointed: they did not accept the idea that the tourists could not afford to pay the sum that the Mursi wanted. The Mursi perceived this form of commerce as completely acceptable. Consequently, both parties had unfulfilled expectations. This caused frustration on both sides but the situation remained unchanged.

Tourists generally visit only one of the Mursi settlements and then return to Jinka in the early afternoon. However, some groups stay overnight in the Mago National Park campsite and continue their trip to the Kara territory the next morning. Tourists are not allowed to spend the night in Mursiland, and must stay in the guarded Mago National Park campsite. According to the park's records, in June 2008, 375 people paid an entrance fee of 100 ETB for foreigners and 80 ETB for Ethiopians. This means that approximately this number also visited the Mursi in this time period, which is significant as June is not the main tourist season in the lower Omo. From July to November, the number of visitors to the Mago National Park almost doubled and Mursi settlements were quickly set up along the roadside in response. New huts were constructed increasingly close to the checkpoint in order to catch tourist cars before they entered other settlements. In an interview with a Mursi man in July 2011, I was told that five new settlements were set up before the Mago Bridge which settlements accommodate more and more tourist encounters on daily basis.

From Jalabai to village bosses: an evolving political status

The encounters, although ephemeral, are of key importance in the Mursi people's daily political and cultural lives. In 2008, I was in Maganto, a place rarely visited by tourists at the time. In the morning, a 4WD stopped in front of the police station and a white woman, two Ethiopian men, and a *Nyangatom* man got out of the car, escorted by a scout guard from the Mago National Park. They started to talk with the Mursi who were in close proximity to the station and together with the local policemen from Maganto began to walk around the settlement searching for the 'leader of the village'. They were soon surrounded by people but the village leader did not come, to the displeasure of the visitors: this situation was not easily communicated by either party. As I described earlier, there is no one leader of a Mursi settlement therefore when the authorities had asked to speak to a leader of the settlement in the past the Mursi had quickly invented one. In Maganto no Mursi person was ever appointed to such a post and in this particular situation, an elder approached the arrivals and a dialogue began.

Necessity is the mother of invention; therefore, the tourist villages also had to construct a 'village leader' if they wanted to communicate with the alien visitors on a daily basis. During my fieldwork, Solbu was the most frequently visited tourist settlement. It was established around 2004 by a middle-aged Mursi man named Aregoro Gigoradan⁷, who was more commonly known as Balsham. Solbu has been a meeting point for aliens (mostly tourists) and the Mursi already in 1999 when I first visited the area. Permanent huts were built in response to the tourists' growing demands from the beginning of the millennium. Balsham brought his friends and relatives to live there and created a place where the Mursi could meet tourists: this is just next to a sandy road, not too far from Jinka and close to the Mago Bridge. Although the Mursi people rarely acknowledge leaders in their society, Balsham slowly picked up all of the

⁷ All personal names are pseudonym in the article.

attributes of a leader in the Western sense. Although he did not become a *Bari*, he had exceptional authority in the area. First of all, he could arrange the money distribution, deciding who could get a share of the cash received from the tourists. Moreover, he managed local ceremonies, governed alcohol consumption, and his was the deciding voice in the smaller debates. On the whole, his character was entirely the reverse of the ‘traditional’ Mursi *jalabai*. The people I spoke to in Mursiland knew him and his reputation reached as far as Jinka. He could speak Amharic, and was familiar with external political issues. Solbu was often known as *BaBalsham*, which literally means ‘Balsham’s land’. His Mursi friend, Torrole Dario, an official Mago National Park scout, also lived in the settlement with his half-brother, his mother. There were other close, mostly matrimonial, familial ties between the inhabitants of Solbu. Besides Balsham, Torrole was another central character in Solbu’s daily life, since he was another important organiser or ‘cultural broker’ in the Mursi-tourist encounters.

Balsham and, to an even greater degree, Torrole, participated in almost every phase of the tourist encounters. Firstly, they collected the 200 ETB (£8) per car from the drivers or the tour guides. This was the general price, which had to be paid by every car that entered Mursi settlements, including Solbu, Dil Dil, Hunai, Mako, and Maganto. Torrole and Balsham went over to the drivers of the cars, whom they were familiar with, greeting them affably and exchanging news; then, Torrole, occasionally with the aid of other, older Mursi men, tried to manage the encounters. As well as being the first points of contact for most Western visitors who entered the villages, they also had control over other tourist villages and local people, even elders, were keen to associate with them.

This type of influence in the Mursi communities is the result of the increasing number of tourists in the area. The tour guides and drivers, mostly highland Ethiopians from Addis Ababa, had never been able to build up any form of communication with the Mursi communities before the advent of these cultural brokers. In my understanding these types of village leaders are not the product of the community but rather they produced a community around themselves. These men created a different type of sociality to the people in other Mursi settlements far from the contact zone. The influence of men such as Balsham and Torrole is not the result of their oratorical skills in public meetings and their calmness. Their position is the result of their communication abilities towards the outside world which ability established access to economic assets that have accumulated during their contact with the outsiders. This autonomy, accrued from a new type of wealth, can be perceived as the media of political power, which has created a new form of Mursi sociality where the symbols of power and influence are not based on age and local affinity but the ability to communicate well with strangers. The importance of oratorical skills in local public meetings is different in the contact zone. The scale of the meetings is different. The basis and the core of ‘traditional’ politics seem to be unsuitable for solving questions engendered by tourism and this is the reason why most Mursi people still have not agreed on tourist issues and most local-tourist encounter is uneasy. The tourist settlements in the contact zone are involved in a situation where the decisions on problematic topics are not based on the personal characters of the *jalabai*. The contact zone is rather a political and economic market space where materials and ideas can be exchanged but political and economic problems still remain unsolved.

Tourism is perceived by the Mursi mainly as a source of acquiring cash. However, this money often enters into the community without an appointed owner. The main source of this money is the village car entrance fee which means approximately 12.000-18.000 ETB monthly income of Solbu. Apart from Balsham’s ad-hoc verdicts there had been no accepted rule for the distribution of this money among the local people and the ownership of this money has

been a contentious issue for the involved Mursi settlements. Inhabitants from South Mursiland claimed money from those in the north; people migrated to the Mago Bridge settlements and claimed money there; and people from Kurum made clear their aspiration for a road to their settlement which would enable tourists to travel to them. These financial claims had different forms. Often different age groups from certain territories united to ask Balsham for money. For example, the *Teri* from the settlements of Maganto or the Bari from *Bele*, put in a joint claim for money, but single individuals also fought for their share, usually people who were not living in the bridge area. Balsham frequently distributed money among the women and often gave cash to people from *Bele*, where his family came from. However, I could not identify any clear strategy in the distribution of cash derived from the aliens' car entrance fees. The daily disputes between the Mursi showed me that this type of income was still novel for the people and they found it difficult to produce an economic distribution system which would guarantee the even sharing of this money amongst the members of the society.

Although tourism directly affects only the people living along the main road, there are much wider consequences of it, namely that people who live farther from the road also want to participate in this new form of economy and contact form.

The contact zone: shielding and filtering the outside world

For an investigation into how tourism affects Mursi politics, it is necessary to take into account the topography of Mursiland and especially where the main road is located in this natural setting. As I mentioned, Mursiland, and the Mursi society, is divided into territorial sections but only the northern section, the *Mara*, intersects with the dusty road from Jinka. The people of each territorial section generally move within their section or between the Omo River and the central pasture territories but not between the road and their settlements. For geographical-topographical reasons the rest of Mursiland is inaccessible by road. The road enables tour operator companies to organise their tours cost effectively, but they only go to north Mursiland. This limit creates an exclusive contact zone between the members of the *Mara* section and the alien arrivals. People in north Mursiland have a much greater opportunity to meet tourists on a daily basis than do those in the south. Since tourism cannot move beyond the road-created border zone, therefore the 'hinterland', the people in South Mursiland have become passive onlookers of the lively events in the north. The contact zone shields the people here from most potential visitors and more often than not alien initiations, in a physical and an ideological sense, cannot reach beyond the road system. Consequently, some Mursi have decided to migrate to the road and the tourist settlements have become even more crowded small places.

As far as I understood the people during my fieldwork, most Mursi are itinerant by nature. People regularly leave their homes for a day or two or even longer, and then return and leave again. People move between cattle camps and settlements, walk along the road, travel to Jinka and back, then set off again to somewhere else. Those Mursi people who walk from Southern Mursiland to Mako and back unavoidably pass through Solbu. Almost every day, new people arrive and leave the settlement. The major immigration occurs during the early mornings, when people from the neighbouring compounds like Hinnai, Dil Dil, Barrege or *Bele* appear in Solbu. These 'commuters' leave Solbu only in the late afternoon, when it is unlikely that tourists will arrive and when the sun is not so high. There are long-term Mursi guests from more distant places like Mako, Maganto or South Mursiland, who stay for a few days – sometimes up to a month – in Solbu. They then return to their home settlements where their

cattle are kept. Friends and relatives enter Solbu every day, meeting people from other settlements and from distant parts of Mursiland.

Therefore Solbu is relatively crowded compared to other areas occupied by the Mursi and due to the high number of Mursi visitors the social landscape is different from other settlements far from the road. My fieldwork census contained 13 huts, which comprised 13 wives, husbands and their young children: 91 people altogether. Husbands, adolescents and single adult males wander between the settlements and cattle camps, sometimes sleeping in Solbu then venturing to Bele, Mako or Maganto. However, the basic rule is that the home of a Mursi person is always where his cattle are located and there are no cattle in Solbu. People keep their livestock in Mi, Mako or somewhere that is close to the Mago River. The female population is also mobile, but they are rather bound to one place because of their babies whom they have to feed regularly.

Migration has always been a determining factor in the Mursi identity, as it has been necessary for their livelihood (Turton, 1988). Now, once again, the people migrate in order to survive, but are not driven by ecological considerations (looking for cool ground) but rather by pure market economics: looking for tourists. Their migration route cuts across all of the territorial sections and 'traditional' migration routes within the territorial sections. During my fieldwork, I documented a new form of migration that crossed the territorial sections and concentrated in the contact zone along the only road in Mursiland. People from South Mursiland migrated towards the road and spent time in one of the tourist villages. When I asked the reason for their travels, they told me that it offered them opportunities to participate in the tourism economy. They wanted to acquire money through being photographed or from the village entrance fee. The road seemed an open opportunity for many to acquire assets independently from the ecological seasons that had always forced the Mursi to change their dwellings. Turton's phrase to describe the relationship between the pastoral mobility and the Mursi identity is that 'The Mursi did not make the journey: a journey made them' (1979: 42). Now, it is interesting that these nomadic people migrate in order to connect with another peripatetic group: the tourists. Travelling is central to the identities of both and journeying is central to the interaction between the Mursi and the tourists. However, being mobile and wandering with the animals is against state ideas of modernity and development. The concept I referred to in my introduction, that nomadism is still a symbol of unreliability to many, factors into the Ethiopian state development plans.

Because of these facts there is a discrepancy in the trajectory of local level politics and the central state's political ambitions and development plans. On the one hand, the state envisages a form of development wherein pastoralism, as a form of livelihood, should be abolished as detrimental to development, tourists are perceived as a passive audience of backwardness and other strangers as hindrances of state development plans. Moreover the state seems anxious about western tourism and uneasy about the openness that globalisation deposits on the shoulders of central government. On the other hand the central government is strongly marketing the country for international tourists therefore more and more strangers visit the Mursi on daily basis. This forces the people, on the local level, to handle a situation on their own way that generates social change within the society. The events I recorded during my fieldwork showed that the local people regard the tourism industry as a way to acquire wealth. The Mursi orchestrate their own development by creating the connections that enable them to benefit from the outside world keeping their pastoral identity behind the contact zone. They develop new identities for their alien visitors and produce a quasi-civil society capable of expressing local political and economic interests. In this sense, the locality is defenceless against the power of the state but constructs a contact zone that (in a physical and in an

imaginary sense) shields and utilises the most active connection with the outside world. I believe that what I witnessed was an evolving pastoral political reaction against growing global political and economic challenges.

For many Mursi people, tourism has become an important ecological resource; one which, aside from animal husbandry and cultivation, is available within their territory. For the assets offered by tourists the Mursi does not need to occupy new lands, migrate outside their territory, nor fight with neighbouring groups. For people pursuing a pastoral lifestyle this is a new prospect and it seems to me that tourism is the only external force in the Mursi living memory with the potential to demonstrably alter the spatial-social-political organisation of certain Mursi groups. Tourism engenders not only new forms of group structure but gives people access to more and more cash, new alien materials, and previously unheard of ideas, including those relating to personal relationships. There are negative and positive outcomes of this process. Some people use these opportunities as a means for buying alcohol and getting drunk but others use their newly acquired money to travel or to buy household goods, food, animal medicine or clothes. As everywhere in the world tourism generates advantage for some and makes disadvantaged others.

Conclusion

“As tourism expands, existing institutions are transformed and new ones created” (Harrison, 1992: 27). Having closely observed the Mursi people’s situation, it is clear that the participation of local people in the development of the tourism industry cannot be isolated from wider political and economic considerations: the situation that the tourism industry has created in Mursiland epitomises a local response to wider political forces. The Mursi socio-political conditions are the representations and symbols of their response to an unclear government policy, and the result of the unsettled relationship between the state, the people, aliens, and society. On the one hand, the Federal Ethiopian Government labels tourism as part of the negative transnational campaign against local development, but on the other hand the government welcomes tourists to the country on a national level. This ambivalent policy forces local people to handle a situation that is a completely new experience for them. The practicality of making contact with strangers on a daily basis institutionalises new forms of communication, leadership, symbolic and material wealth.

Here I took a sort of anthropological standpoint, what Chabal (2009) and Ferguson (1994) suggest for development anthropologists and understood the problem of Mursiland as the question of the ‘local’. What I investigated here is how the global flow of ideas stratifies and affects a localised community. In this case outsider agents would like to activate ideas about ‘development’ and ‘progress’ and the local community mobilises these thoughts on their own ways. In this sense this issue is part of the tension of globalisation and modernity, well described by Appadurai (1996) but especially by Zygmunt Bauman (1998) in the concept of the ‘discomfort of localised existence’.

The Mursi peoples’ interactions with tourists allow them to engage with the global powers that force themselves into the Mursi daily life. As I have argued, the Mursi people are often disappointed by the tourists’ behaviour. They show their anger at the outside world by mocking the tourists and acting as ‘wild savages’. The local-tourist *contact zone* becomes a *political space* where local people can express their opinions of the outsiders: in this sense, the new alliance between people in Mursiland can be understood as a sort of civil society ‘Formed by all those who are able to manage and steer communal anger’ (Monga, 1996: 149).

The way the Mursi engage in tourism, in this sense, can be understood as the only social form of communication with the outside world where they can express their opinions and feelings. Therefore the tourists contact zone is an active theatre where the local people dress up as ‘savages’ and the tourists, and through them the Ethiopian state, is the audience.

Controlling the encounters through simulated anger and institutionalising subaltern political allies is the means of coping with globalised powers. Engaging in tourism is an ambivalent political attitude that allows both the involvement and withdrawal from the political floor. The Mursi converts the rules and power that the state imposes on them and tries to control it. Tourism is currently the only option for communication with the outside world. Tourism can be understood to represent the multilevel political aspirations in an area that became important for the central Ethiopian government only in the past decade. The Ethiopian government generates a protest narrative against western agencies and in the same time creates their own development narrative borrowing and mimicking western agencies’ ideology. In this sense, Ethiopia’s development aspirations have become a shadow (Ferguson, 2006) of western modernity where informal daily politics do not accord with the state’s imagination.

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