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## The anthropology of tourism and development in Africa: mobile identities in a pastoral society in South-Ethiopia

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**Abstract:** While the travel industry increasingly contributes to most developing countries' GDP, it does not necessarily follow that international tourism fosters microeconomic stability. Local perceptions of tourism and development are often different from supraregional political and economic views. This article explores how tourism, as a new source of wealth, is perceived in a small-scale localised community in Ethiopia and how this view differs from the national rhetoric and development plans in the country. The paper discusses how relatively new forms of contacts give ground to emerging political institutions which begin as tentative interest groups but become protagonists in local politics. I analyse a process that I documented during a one-year anthropological fieldwork among the Mursi, a South Ethiopian pastoral society, wherein daily encounters challenged local groups' decision-making processes, compelling them to form new allies and cooperate and collaborate in a new way.

**Keywords:** politics; nomadism; pastoralism; migration; identity; border zone; Ethiopia; Omo River; Mursi; tourism; anthropology; development; East Africa.

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### 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Based on a one year long ethnographic fieldwork<sup>2</sup> in an East-African pastoral society, this article describes how international tourists have amplified the development of a new social identity among certain groups of the South-Ethiopian Mursi people. I focus on how international tourists generate new local alliances, and how this new form of cooperation

has led to the formations of local political identities in this pastoral society. I also describe how the local population constructs a political institution as a basis for daily contacts with tourists who arrive to visit them. I show how these invented political identities can be understood as a form of resistance to the central state, and how the Ethiopian national development plans – despite the fact that there are two National Parks and a designated World Heritage Site in the Lower Omo Valley – are not concomitant with local practice.

It is always a challenging issue to clearly define ‘tourists’, who rarely constitute a homogeneous group of people. In this research area, the majority (84%) of the visitors were Spanish nationality.<sup>3</sup> Others were Italian, French, Dutch, German, British, US, Japanese, Canadian, Israeli, Hungarian and Polish. Only a very few Ethiopian and other African tourists visited the site during my field research. Therefore, I use the phrase ‘Western tourists’ to refer to those people who arrived in Ethiopia, and in the lower Omo Valley, from the above-mentioned countries in order to engage in leisure activities and to visit local cultures.

After outlining the theories I use to frame my argument, I briefly discuss how pastoral societies perceive changing values of material and social conditions in East Africa. Tourism enters into the constant identity negotiation that pastoralist people undertake within their established set of values. After discussing these general issues, I introduce the Mursi and 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 discuss how the Mursi invent political roles and institutions in order to communicate with tourists, Highland traders and government officials and how the local population constructs a political exterior that enables them to accommodate their daily encounters with tourists.

### *1.1 Methodological challenges for tourist studies in Africa*

According to a report by the UK Department for International Development (DFID): “Among the top 40 recipients of DFID bilateral aid, tourism is significant” [DFID, (1999), p.9], moreover in these countries tourism is also often regarded as the passport to development (de Kadt, 1979). However, questions, such as on what scale tourism is likely to make the biggest contribution to development and what are the influences that determine the extent to which tourism can play an effective role in development, have only recently been addressed in tourism studies (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002). As there is still insufficient 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; likewise in the development literature, tourism has yet to receive the necessary 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 have little to offer in practice.

Hall (2003) argues that there is little agreement on how tourism policies, as a new area of study, should be analysed, as there is still no well-defined analytical and theoretical framework for these interrelated disciplines. This is surprising, given the emphasis of politicians, especially from African countries, on tourism as a means of economic development (Hall, 1996). Since the 1970s, lots of governments have recognised the economic benefits of international tourism (Richter, 2009) and tried to use

the tourism industry to generate economic capital. Moreover, together with the expected economic regional stability, some countries, such as Kenya, have used tourism as a political pawn; meanwhile, some political regimes, such as in the Philippines in the 1980s, have suffered from their opposition counterparts using the tourism industry to incite political unrest (Richter, 1992). Whatever direction the political use of tourism takes, as the travel industry expands existing social institutions are transformed and new ones created (Harrison, 1992), and this issue, based on long ethnographic fieldwork, is rarely addressed in contemporary Africa. As McKean argues: “[F]ew analyses exist of alternative mechanisms available to indigenous populations to resist change, or to retain or even revitalize their social fabric and customs within the changed conditions wrought by the tourist industry” ([1977] 1989, p.120).

Taking a holistic view of development is one of the major points anthropologists emphasise. Instead of look at development as an economic enlargement and study it as an isolated phenomenon we must approach it as part of wider social and cultural system (Burns, 1999). This holistic view on development can better accommodate the acts of different international actors and their relationship to the local communities.

From a methodological point of view, this text focuses on alternative political mechanisms available for local people to cope with tourists and the political and social challenges which the tourism industry generates. Given the disciplinary fields with which this study intersects (African political studies, anthropology, development and tourism studies), the text blends different theoretical frameworks. First of all, from the point of view of African political science, the methodology integrates Chabal’s (2009) argument on the role of the theory in understanding contemporary African societies. He suggests that the problem with contemporary African political sciences is that “what we set out to discover is what we know already because we have a sense of how the political system works” (2009, p.16). He suggests a rather inductive approach to study everyday life in Africa which approach I adopt in this study. This is an attempt to see African politics from below, or rather from within. From an anthropological standpoint Bruner (2005) take a similar and compelling position in his analysis of African tourist encounters.<sup>4</sup> For Bruner (2005), tourist encounters in ‘developing’ countries postulate certain power strategies which create a system where temporal social relationships gradually become permanent social axioms. Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s (1994) investigating a post-colonial tourist setting in Kenya, called this system ‘tourist realism’. Tourist realism was created in places where the strategic local performances for tourists were based on strict implicit social principles. Tourists, locals, authorities, facility owners and industry workers followed a set of formal rules while they encountered. The symbolic order of these principles derived from the historical moment (post-colonial Africa), from the national aspirations (Kenya as a new independent country) and from the local identities (a farm of British descendants employing indigenous Maasai dancers).

In the case of the Mursi, there is no such established locus of control, a strategic rationalisation of a power relationship that characterises local performance as in tourist realism. The space where the Mursi encounter tourists was hardly controlled by the agents of the Ethiopian Government, owners of tourist facilities or any non-governmental organisation. The tourist villages in Mursiland, because of their fluid social and physical nature and their recent and still uncertain qualities, were difficult to control politically for state authorities. Therefore, I take a similar theoretical approach to Bruner, investigating certain form of power relationships in an East-African tourist setting, but must emphasise

that the Mursi does not have the same formal legitimising political agencies as do the Maasai.

The space of encounter I describe is the product of emerging social practices. This touristic border zone (Bruner, 2005) “is a creative space, a site for the invention of culture on a massive scale” (2005, p.193). Here, my theoretical aim is to analyse the invention of new political culture. I describe not only the production of tourist culture (ethnic performances) but discuss how the Mursi has devised a new political frame for their contacts in the tourist border zone: in a locale that lacks most characteristics of formal political control and gives space for informal codes of conduct. Bruner describes the fluid nature of the tourist border zone with people, hosts and guests: “flowing across the border like each new freshman class in college” (2005, p.192). This is even more relevant to the Mursi-tourist border zone where two mobile societies, the Mursi and the tourists, encounter each other on a daily basis. Tourism generates Mursi mobility and vice versa; they constantly reproduce each other’s movement on a physical, as well as on a social, scale.

### *1.2 The politics of tourism development in East-African nomadic societies*

Despite the fact that tourism makes a major contribution to the economies of East Africa (Foster et al., 2000), nation states are often hesitant about welcoming tourists to their regions. Allowing non-citizens 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. In non-Western countries, tourism has often been regarded as a form of neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism (Nash, 1989, 1977; Matthews, 2003).

This political uncertainty is particularly likely when tourists travel to places where even central governments have little control, such as in the territories of nomads and pastoral people. Many pastoral societies (except the Maasai) have only recently, approximately in the past 20 years, encountered Europeans in mass numbers. However, historical experience has made local pastoral groups aware that colonial state officials and travellers have powerful political and economic influence and challenge the confidence of ‘stateless’ societies. However, these new relationships, the short-lived but pivotal encounters between two mobile cultures (nomads and Western tourists) are the expressions of a new type of political connection wherein the power is often negotiated.

The social, political and economic situation of most East-African nomadic societies which the recent tourism industry encounters is very sensitive. Anthropologists and historians have looked at the way that nomadic societies can adapt to social changes, but tourism has rarely been the focus of these studies. It is common sense that no nomadic society could function in isolation (Galaty, 1981; Sobania, 1991; Spencer, 1998), 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 have always been more interested in trade than sedentary societies [Khazanov, (1983), p.202]. Therefore, studying the history of nomad-sedentary contacts in East Africa (Waller, 1999) reveals that in order to become or remain nomadic has always meant adapting to other societies, to sedentary people close to the governing state that also controlled the tourist industry. However, the active trade and exchange relations between nomads and sedentary societies do not automatically entail painless political integration into the governing states and difficult situations frequently arise which are mirrored in

nomad-tourist relationships. A tense relationship between pastoral societies and the central government is characteristic of most East-African countries.

In discussions of modernisation, tourism and development, the Maasai is the most frequently described East-African pastoral society (see studies in Spear and Waller, 1993; Potkanski, 1999; Rigby, 1985; Talle, 1999). Despite the fact that for a long time they have been seen as an archetypal 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 describes: a central area where people keep their cattle and depend mostly on them and 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 them (Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 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, 2002). As Waller (1993, p.247) argues, the Maasai has often maintained their ethnic identity in relation to alien political and economic forces.

The Turkana is a geographically and politically more secluded pastoral society than the Maasai. As Vigdis Broch-Due states, the way in which the pastoral Turkana people and development workers see their environment often causes confrontation. The Turkana see the small towns emerging 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), p.87]. Spencer (1998) uses the semi-nomad Chamu people as an example of the dynamics 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 peoples. He emphasises how different generations have engaged in social mobility, modernisation and communication with non-nomadic societies. The semi-pastoral Nuer society has 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, gun and paper triad (1996, p.27). Although the Nuer has incorporated money into their value system, cash co-exists with 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), p.98].

The socio-cultural marginalisation of pastoral societies in East Africa, especially in the 1980s, resulted in a new social topography of the poor and the prosperous [Broch-Due and Anderson, 1999]. By the 1990s, the pastoral societies in this part of the continent became subject to the attention of two alien groups: tradition-seeking tourists and development agencies. The Western tourists wanted to see marginal, excluded people because they invoked forgotten traditions. The development agents, both national and international, took the position that East-African pastoral production, lacking modern

interventions, was insufficient, therefore, to avoid destitution they needed help from the outside their community. The two narratives seem analogous but are fundamentally different. Tourists have often had the belief that the 'traditional' lifestyle is a must for survival. For development agencies, the nomad lifestyle will fail because it cannot cope with the wider scheme of commoditisation and the modern world economy. Therefore, when Eastern-African Governments use international tourism as a development tool in nomadic societies it can trigger a conundrum between tourists, local hosts and government officials.

Therefore, tourism was 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, nothing in the political structure of tourism is written in tablets of stone: policy strategies are constantly changing in as industry develops (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, meeting Western tourists is often a new political experience for many nomads. In the eyes of localised 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 nomads' terrains are often uncontrolled by central governments and the aggressive mobility of Western tourists regularly causes logistical dilemmas for local governments.

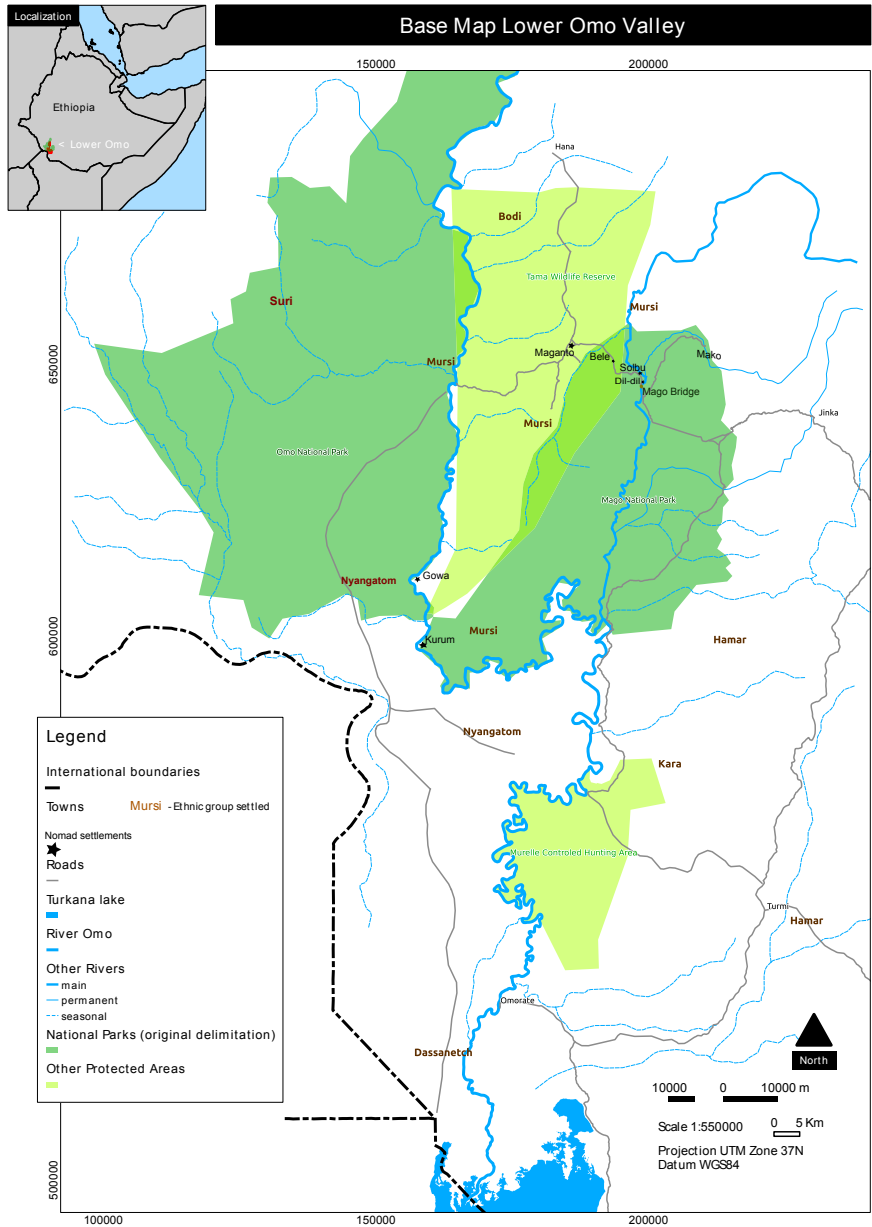
Because of these novel intercultural situations, everyday politics has a certain dynamic that differs from colonial and early post-colonial administrative protocols. The pastoral societies' encounters with Western tourists do not follow an established political etiquette. It is still not possible to 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 border zones have evolved, usually along the road systems originally produced by settled, governing societies. Roads have thus become the trajectories of cultural contact, social change and material exchange; they are symbols of development and carriers of new political ideas. Tourists enter into an ongoing political discussion between settlers and nomads where easily identifiable physical border zones give ground to communication.

## **2 'Traditional' Mursi politics**

As my aim is to show how tourism, a fairly recent cultural and political force, has caused political change among the Mursi, an East-African pastoral society, I firstly describe the 'traditional' Mursi political and social organisation. I understand the traditional lifestyle as Spencer (1998) defines it in his discussion of 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), p.2]. Keeping this in my mind, I have used an early description of the Mursi political organisation written by Turton (1973, 1979), who has spent a considerable

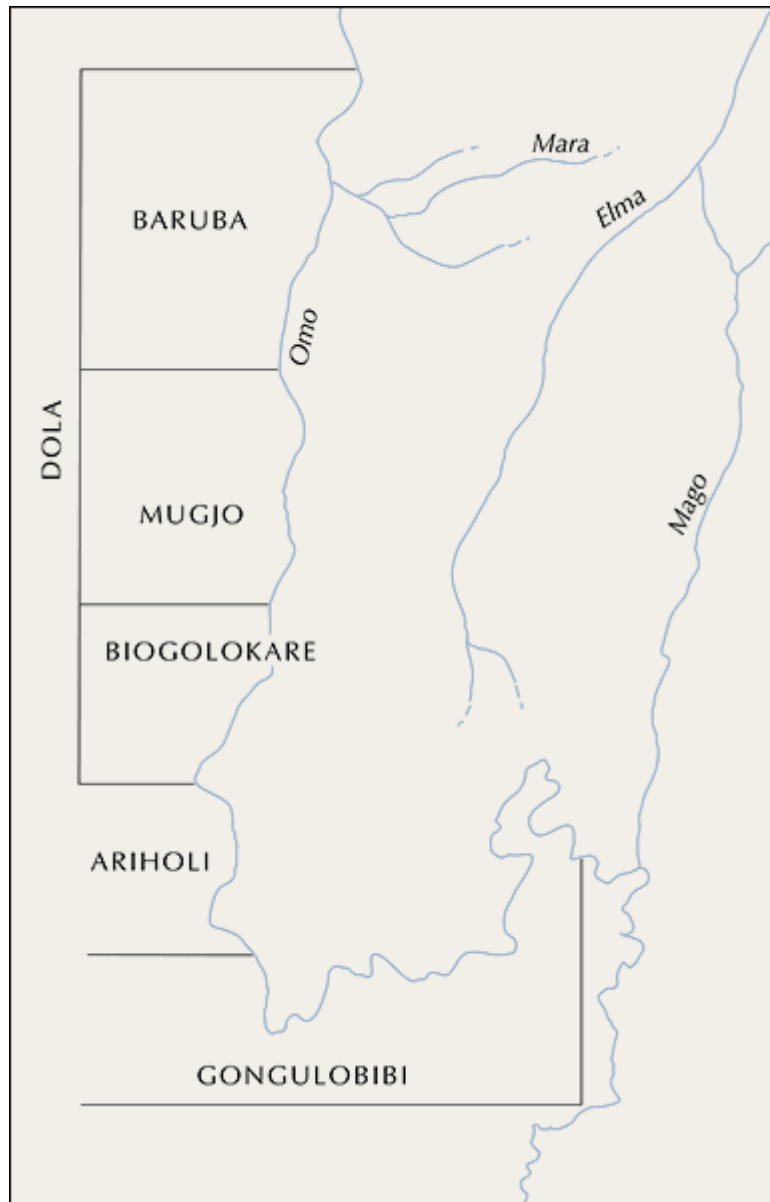
amount of time among the Mursi since the late 1960s. Then and now the political life of the Mursi is connected to the topography of Mursiland and the people's economic, social and mobility patterns. The people's yearly mobility patterns and political gatherings, and their related rituals, are all connected to the geographical features of the land.

**Figure 1** A map of the lower Omo Valley, showing the boundaries of the Omo and the Mago National Parks and the Tama Wildlife Reserve (see online version for colours)



Source: Courtesy of Miguel Sevilla Callejo

**Figure 2** Local groups (*bhuronyaga*) of the Mursi (see online version for colours)



Source: Courtesy of David Turton, and <http://www.mursi.org>

The Mursi, whose population is between 8,000 and 10,000, live in a 2,000 km<sup>2</sup> 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% of the people's livelihood relies on agricultural products and the rest on animal husbandry.



The Mursi people practice two types of farming and animal husbandry, which generally involves raising cattle. Mursiland is divided into five major locales organised into 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 which 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 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<sup>5</sup> that does not allow the population to stay in one place all year (Turton, 1973) and structures the community's time, work and mobility.

Aside from the territorial divisions, Mursi men are categorised according to age (Turton, 1978). Each male belongs to one of the age grades which 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 20s. The *teru* live together in cattle camps; here they take care of their animals, court unmarried girls. Once a man is married, they enter into the *rora* group, while the elderly members of the society are known as the *bara*.

The most important political event in Mursi life is the public meeting, when group decisions are made. The married men in a given area gather together to discuss various topics. There is no leader or political chief in the Western sense in the Mursi society, but the meetings usually end with words from one of the *bara* or a respected *rora*. 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.

### 3 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 of the group, 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), p.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 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 people's view of themselves “as a small, *localized*, poor, technologically backward and relatively powerless group living in the margins of the Ethiopian state” (Turton, 2004b).

The early 1980s saw 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, before 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). Few people had engaged in any form of administrative encounter with the state. When they were suddenly brought into contact with the government and met tourists in large numbers, they came to realise that their strategy of disengagement was not only out-dated but also counterproductive (Turton, 2004b).

On 25 January 2011, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, gave a public speech<sup>6</sup> in Jinka, a small but important market town in the lower Omo region that is one of the farthest urban locations from the topographically central Addis Ababa. The Prime Minister spoke about how the government plans to develop this frontier 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 an underdeveloped 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 also 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 River.<sup>7</sup> The speech implicitly labelled the traditional (pastoral) way of life as financially insufficient. It was clear from the words that pastoralism in this area did not fit into the 'national project'. The 'civilised state' would 'develop' the 'backward pastoralist' society, providing them with a road system and irrigation. However, the potential complications of this endeavour, according to the Prime Minister, were the "best friends of backwardness and poverty": the Western development agencies, researchers and scholars who have criticised the government's plans.<sup>8</sup> Zenawi argued that these people want to hold back development and keep the locals as tourist attractions. Labelling all local-transnational connections as harmful because they enable local people to challenge state policy is a key legitimising device for state policy. The concepts of tourism, development and the 'local-stranger' distinction were picked up and employed for current state purposes. Zenawi labelled the tourism industry as the spectator of a transnational conspiracy against 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 to foreign tourists, the 'traditional' lifestyle of the people in the lower Omo Valley becomes an asset.

### *3.1 Tourism in the lower Omo Valley*

Ethiopia is a relatively new<sup>9</sup> international tourist destination compared with other parts of East-Africa, such as Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. 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 enables a country's tourism industry to develop. 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 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, Sukkar (2004) then Ethiopia's Commissioner of Tourism, outlined the importance of tourism to the country's economy. He acknowledged that the tourism sector did not represent a major factor in the Ethiopian economy (it was only 2% in 2004); however, the country wanted to change this. He argued that Ethiopia perceived tourism as an export economy and that he wished to develop the necessary infrastructure for future investments in travel to the country. For the new Ethiopian millennium, which was in 2007 according to the Western calendar, the government started a worldwide marketing campaign to attract tourists for the celebrations. Mohamud Dirir, Ethiopia's current Culture and Tourism Minister, has urged private sector investments in the tourism sector and got World Bank loans to develop 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 the Ethiopian tour operators' websites<sup>10</sup> market the 'Tribal South', as they label the lower Omo Valley, as one of the key attractions on offer.

The bridge over the Mago River was built in the first half of the 1980s, and had a huge impact on the relationship between the Mursi and those who visited them. Their primary interest in doing so was to see the women who wore large lip plates (Figure 3). The itinerary was, and still is, as follows. 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, the location of the first Mursi settlements.

Encounters between the Mursi and their visitors have always been uneasy (Régi, 2013b). The tourists see the Mursi as a tribe of wild people: the men naked and wielding Kalashnikovs and the women wearing enormous lip-plates. The Mursi frequently touch their visitors, which many regard as socially unacceptable and even frightening. The perceived violence of the Mursi is emphasised by the guides. Every morning, the Mursi who live in the villages visited by the tourists prepare themselves for their encounters. They seek to conform to the tourists' expectations: painting themselves and put different masquerades on their head.

Many tourists are annoyed by the Mursi people's behaviour, by their 'aggressive manner' and the fact that they are 'too touchy', but it is mainly their 'too commercial' attitude which incites their visitors' wrath, when they ask them to pose for photos and the Mursi request a higher price for doing so than they have been offered. During my fieldwork, I often saw angry tourists waving bank notes at Mursi people; they usually continued to refuse the cash, and the tourists then often put the money on the ground and left. With the help of one of the drivers or the guides, the negotiations continued until the tourists paid the required sum, or the original offer was accepted by the Mursi. There were cases when an 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 pictures or asked their guide to leave the village. However, the Mursi were also disappointed in this instance: they did not accept the idea that the tourists could not afford to pay the sum that they wanted. They perceived this form of commerce as completely acceptable. Consequently, both parties had unfulfilled expectations. This caused frustration on both sides but the situation remained the same. From July to November, the number of visitors to the Mago National Park increases and Mursi settlements are quickly set up along the roadside in response. New huts are constructed increasingly close to the checkpoint in order to catch tourist cars before they enter other settlements. In an interview with a Mursi man in July 2011, I was told that five new settlements had been set up before the Mago Bridge which accommodated an increasing number of tourist encounters on a daily basis.

**Figure 3** A Mursi woman waiting for tourists in Solbu (see online version for colours)



Source: Photo Tamás Régi

### 3.2 *From jalabai to village bosses: an evolving political status*

The Mursi name for tourists is *touristinya* (singular: *touristy*), while white men are known to them as *haranchinya* (singular: *haranchi*). All Highlands Ethiopian people are called *kuchumba*. Their encounters with these two sets of people, 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. On one morning, a 4WD stopped in front of the police station and a *haranchi*, two *kuchumba* and a *nyangatom* man got out of the car, escorted by a scout guard from the Mago National Park. They spoke with the Mursi who were in close proximity to the station and together with 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, which displeased the visitors, who did not understand the reason for this. As I mentioned 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 invented one. In this particular situation, an elder approached the arrivals and a dialogue began. Consequently, tourist villages also had to construct a 'village leader' if they wanted to communicate with visitors on a daily basis.

During my fieldwork, the settlement, called Solbu, was the most frequently visited tourist settlement. Although Solbu was a meeting point for *touristinya* and the Mursi prior to 1999, when I first visited the area, it was 'established' around 2004 by a middle-aged Mursi man named Aregoro Gigoradan,<sup>11</sup> more commonly known as Balsham. From the beginning of the millennium, permanent huts were built in response to the tourists' growing demands. My fieldwork census contained 13 huts, which comprised 13 wives, husbands and their young children: 91 people altogether. Husbands, adolescents and single adult males wandered between the settlements and cattle camps, sometimes sleeping in Solbu then going to other settlements such as Bele, Mako or Maganto. However, the basic rule was that the home of a Mursi person was always where his cattle were located and there were no cattle in Solbu. People kept their livestock in Mi, Mako or somewhere close to the Mago River. The female population was also mobile, but they were often limited in their mobility to one place because of their babies whom they fed regularly.

Balsham brought his friends and relatives to live there and created a place where the Mursi could meet *touristinya*. Although the Mursi people rarely acknowledge leaders in their society, Balsham slowly acquired all of the typical attributes of a leader in the Western sense. Although he did not become a *bari*, he had exceptional authority. Firstly, he arranged the money distribution, deciding who could get a share of the cash received from *touristinya*. Moreover, he managed local ceremonies and governed alcohol consumption, and his was the deciding voice in the smaller debates. On the whole, his character was entirely different to 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'. There were other close, mostly matrimonial, familial ties between the inhabitants of Solbu. Balsham's brother, Samekaulo Aregidanga, lived in the next hut to Balsham's, opposite their mother's hut.

Besides Balsham, Torrole, an official Mago National Park scout, was another central figure in Solbu's daily life. He lived in the settlement with his half-brother and his mother. He spoke fluent Amharic and he was also familiar with the administrative system of the Mago National Park, where he worked. He was aware of how tour operators and tourists entered into this formal system and the Mursi's obligations to these actors. If the head of the Mago National Park wanted to communicate with the inhabitants of Solbu, he went to Torrole. He was a helpful and optimistic person, respected by other Mursi, and if Balsham was not around, Torrole was responsible for incidents occurring in the settlement: unofficially, he was charged with keeping order during the encounters in

Solbu, with keeping back the mass of kids and women who overran *touristinya*, and he was charged with taking care of me when I lived in Solbu. He was responsible for the smooth relations between the Mursi and visitors. Therefore, he was always in between: between the Mursi and the tourists, between the Mursi and the Mago National Park management, between the Mursi and me. He often came to my living quarters to escape from his fellows who continuously required money, alcohol or other help from him. Torrole's status was lower than Balsham's, but his personality seemed to help him through any problems. His secure financial background, which was based on his monthly 860 ETB income from the Mago National Park, also enabled him to smoothly manage his personal relations. He rarely claimed money from the common cash pool which was derived from the money gained from tourists, and he often gave and lent money to other Mursi people. Torrole had been on scout training in Arba Minch, and he owned a scout uniform with a pair of boots. When I arrived in Solbu, he was one of the first people to help me to pitch my tent.

*Touristinya* is perceived by the Mursi mainly as a source of acquiring cash. However, this money often enters into the community without an appointed owner. Torrole and Balsham collected the 200 Ethiopian Birr (ETB) (£8) per car from the drivers, who were mostly *kuchumba*, or the tour guides. It means approximately 12,000–18,000 ETB a month for Solbu. This was also the price that had to be paid by every car that entered other 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 older Mursi men, tried to manage the encounters. As well as being the first points of contact for most *touristinya* and *kuchumba* who entered the villages, they had control over other tourist villages and local people, even the elders, were keen to associate with them. The main form of tourist money distribution in Solbu was always a chaotic afternoon public meeting.

Aside from Balsham's ad-hoc money-distribution decisions there has been no accepted rule for the dissemination of this money among the local people, and this has been a contentious issue in the Mursi settlements. People living in South Mursiland claimed money from those in the north; some migrated to the Mago Bridge settlements and claimed money there; and people from Kurum, south of Mursiland, made clear their aspiration for a road to their settlement, which would enable tourists to travel to them. These financial claims took different forms. Often, different age groups from certain territories came together to ask Balsham for money, for example, the *teri* from the Maganto settlements or the *bari* from Bele put in a joint claim. However, individuals also fought for their share; these were usually people who were not living in the bridge area. Balsham frequently distributed money among the women and often 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 tourists' car-entrance fees. The daily disputes between the Mursi showed me that this type of income was still new for the people, and they found it difficult to produce an economic distribution system that would guarantee the even sharing of this money amongst the members of the society. In my understanding, these types of village leaders are not the product of the community but people who produced a community around themselves.

The influence of men such as Balsham and Torrole is not the result of rhetoric in public meetings or calmness. Their position is the result of their communication skills, which enables them to gain access to money. This autonomy, accrued from a new source

of wealth, can be perceived as the medium of 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 on the ability to communicate well with tourists, government officials and Highland traders. The importance of oratorical skills in local public meetings is different in the border zone. The scale of the meetings is also different. The basis and the core of 'traditional' politics seem to be unsuitable for solving questions engendered by tourism, and this is the reason that most Mursi people have still not agreed on tourist issues and most local-tourist encounters are uneasy. The tourist settlements in the border zone are involved in a situation where the decisions on problematic topics are not based on the personal characteristics of the *jalabai*. The border zone is a political and economic market space where materials and ideas can be exchanged but political and economic problems remain unsolved.

Balsham, Torrole and people in other Mursi settlements managed not only the physical side of the tourist encounters but also directed their social aspects. They bore some resemblance to the people that tourist studies consider 'culture brokers' [Nash (1977, 1989), p.48; McKean, 1976]: those who fulfil the role of mediator between hosts and guests. Most of the characteristics that Cohen (1985) attributes to culture brokers are relevant for these Mursi middlemen. They provided social access to the 'front regions' (MacCannell, 1976, 1999) of the tourist site; they also provided physical security for the visitors and managed tensions between the parties. However, Torrole and Balsham were not tour guides who gave physical directions to their customers; they mediated between the *kuchumba* tour guides and the host population. The tour guides and drivers, mostly highland Ethiopians from Addis Ababa, had not built up any form of communication with the Mursi communities before the advent of these culture brokers.

As social mediators, Balsham, Torrole and others in neighbouring tourist villages had an ambivalent role in their society: despite the social deference shown to them, they did not always appear to be respected. Mursi migrants from other territorial sections were not always respectful to these 'new leaders' from the north and the accumulated income in these settlements triggered social tensions between inhabitants of different territorial sections. Although tourism directly affected only the people living along the main road, there were much wider consequences of it; people who lived farther from the road also wanted to participate in this new form of economy and form of contact.

### 3.3 *The border zone: shielding and filtering*

For a comprehensive 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 discussed above roads create a distinct border zones between tourists and mobile nomad societies and it was also the case in Mursiland. Here, the Mursi-tourist border zone contains characteristics of what MacCannell (1976, 1999) calls the front and back regions of tourist settings. The front regions are the social meeting spaces for outsiders and insiders while the back regions are places for the members of the home team to retire and rest. One source of social anxiety is the possibility that outsiders will penetrate the back regions. Solbu, and other tourist settlements along the road, acted as front regions that 'protect' the back regions of Mursiland. Tourists visiting Mursi villages went to see these back regions in an attempt to discover the 'real' Mursi. Their eyes, the 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990) was looking for ruptures in the cultural setting of these villages and people often wandered over the

settlements, searching for the 'real' Mursi everyday life. This type of "tourist consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences" [MacCannell, (1976, 1999), p.101] and the Solbu can be easily regarded as one of the staged setting in Mursiland that satisfies this desire. As tourists searched for the 'real' Mursi more and more Mursi people decided to search for tourists in the hope to earn money from them. The front region of the tourist site, such as Solbu, became a drawing force for local people who had no dwelling in the border zone and this caused some difficulties in their everyday life.

As I mentioned, Mursiland, and the Mursi society, is divided into territorial sections, but only the northern section, the Mara, intersects the dusty road from Jinka. The people of each territorial section generally move horizontally within their section or between the Omo River and the central pasture territories, but not vertically 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 border zone between the members of the *Mara* and the tourists. 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 some people in South Mursiland have become passive onlookers of the lively events in the north. The border zone shields the people here from most potential visitors, and more often than not government initiations, in a physical and an ideological sense, cannot reach beyond the road system.

As far as I understood during my fieldwork, most Mursi people are itinerant by nature. People regularly leave their homes for a day or two, or longer, and then return and leave again. They move between cattle camps and settlements, walk along the road, travel to Jinka and back then set off again somewhere else. Those Mursi people who walk from Southern Mursiland to Mako and back must pass through Solbu. Almost every day, new people arrive and leave the settlement. The major migration occurs during the early mornings, when people from the neighbouring compounds, such as 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 – although 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.

Migration has always been a determining factor in the Mursi identity, as it has been necessary for their livelihood (Turton, 1988). Now, the people migrate in order to survive, but are no longer driven by only 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 sections. During my fieldwork, I documented a new form of migration that crossed the territorial sections and concentrated on the border 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 why they did so, they said that it offered them opportunities to participate in the tourism economy. They wanted to acquire money through being photographed or from the village entrance fees. The road was an opportunity for many to acquire assets independently from the ecological seasons which



had always forced them to change their dwellings. Tourism created opportunities for 'development' by channelling extra cash income for certain Mursi communities and Mursi individuals made the effort (migrate, perform) to get access to this new form of wealth.

Turton's (1979, p.42) 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". Now, these nomadic people migrate in order to connect with another peripatetic group: the tourists. However, despite this commonality the Mursi scorned tourists as they did not stop long enough to communicate with their local hosts. "They are always just coming and going" was the main criticism of tourists. The Mursi perceived their travel and mobility as different and superior to mere 'tourism'. However, despite the fact that the Mursi condemned the tourists' thoughtless behaviour, they regularly asked to travel with them, for example, they asked the tour guides or the drivers of the tourist cars to bring them to the closest town or very near to a neighbouring settlement.

Travelling is central to the identities of both the Mursi and their tourist visitors and journeying is central to their interactions. However, being mobile and wandering with animals is against state ideas of modernity and development. The concept referred to earlier, 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, while tourists are perceived as a passive audience of backwardness as hindrances of state development plans. The state seems anxious about tourism and uneasy about the effect of globalisation on the central government. On the other hand, the central government is strongly marketing the country to international tourists; therefore, more and more people visit the Mursi on daily basis. This situation forces the people, on a local level, to handle a situation in their own way, which generates social change. The events recorded during my fieldwork show that the local people regard the tourism industry as a way to acquire wealth. The Mursi develop new identities for visitors (tourists, government officials, and traders) and produce a quasi-civil society capable of expressing local political and economic interests. In this sense, the local people are defenceless against the power of the state but construct a border zone that (in a physical and a social sense) shields and utilises the most active connection with the central government and the tourism industry. 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 of the few which, aside from animal husbandry and cultivation, is available within their territory. To acquire 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 tourism is the only external force in the Mursi living memory with the potential to demonstrably alter the spatial-social-political organisation of certain of their 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 to buy alcohol and get drunk but others use their newly

acquired money to travel or to buy household goods, food, animal medicine or clothes: as with everywhere in the world tourism generates advantages for some and disadvantages for others.

#### **4 Conclusions**

“As tourism expands, existing institutions are transformed and new ones created” [Harrison, (1992), p.27]. Having closely observed the Mursi people’s situation, it is clear that the participation of locals 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 the state’s political forces. The above described Mursi social conditions are political responses to an unclear government policy, and the result of the unsettled relationship between the state and the Mursi 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 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 tourists on a daily basis institutionalises new forms of communication, leadership and symbolic and material wealth.

The Mursi people’s interactions with tourists allow them to engage with the globalisation that is now an inextricable component of their daily life. As I have argued, the people are often disappointed by the tourists’ behaviour. They show their anger at the government and the aggressive tourism industry by mocking the tourists and acting the part of ‘wild savages’. The local-tourist *border zone* becomes a *political zone* where local people can express their opinions of the government and tourism industry: 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), P.149]. The way the Mursi engage in tourism, in this sense, can be understood as the only social form of communication with the state where they can express their opinions and feelings. Therefore, the tourist border zone is an active theatre where the local people act as ‘savages’ and the tourists, and through them the Ethiopian state, are their audience.

Controlling the encounters through simulated anger and institutionalising subaltern political allies is the means of coping with political globalisation. Engaging in tourism is an ambivalent political attitude that allows both involvement and withdrawal from the political arena. The Mursi people subvert the rules and power that the state imposes on them. Tourism is currently the only option for communication with the central government. It can be understood to represent 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 at 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 modernity where informal daily politics do not accord with the state’s imagination. At the end of this process the state fails to see the needs of the local community and the practice of development remains a political machine which fails to enable the Mursi in their linkages with the wider regional and global connections.

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## Notes

- 1 The first draft of this paper was presented at the First Oxford Democracy, Governance and Development Conference in June 2011 in the Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford. It was a great conference and my paper benefitted enormously from the participants' comments. I am also grateful for the two anonymous *IJA* reviewers for their comments on my text. My basic research was supported by the British Institute in Eastern Africa and the Leeds Metropolitan University.
- 2 During my fieldwork (Régi, 2011) I followed a classical ethnographic research method, conducting interviews, participant observation and spent as much time with the people as possible. This work was supplemented by visual recordings as I took about 500 photographs on tourist encounters.
- 3 The data collected in the field contradicts the Ethiopian international tourist arrival statistics (World Tour Organisation, 2008), where Spain is not even on Ethiopia's inbound tourist list. According to this, in 2006, 26.3% of the tourists visiting Ethiopia were European: mainly British, Italian, German, French, Dutch, Swiss and Russian.
- 4 In general on East-African tourist encounters, see Bruner (2002), Galaty (2002) and 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) and Turton (2004a) and Régi (2012, 2013a) on the semi pastoral groups in the lower Omo Valley in Ethiopia.
- 5 Transhumance is the word for the seasonal movement of livestock herds from one climatic zone to another (Salzman, 2005), usually from high to low lands and back.
- 6 The speech can be accessed at: <http://www.mursi.org/news-items/huge-irrigation-scheme-planned-for-the-lower-omo-valley>.
- 7 <http://www.addisfortune.com/Waterworks%20Enterprise%20Begins%20Surveying%20for%20New%20Sugar%20Dev%20%80%99t.htm>.
- 8 The Human Rights Watch (2012), the 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% 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 90,000 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.

- 9 The country's yearly tourist flow in 1963 was 19,215 and 290,458 in 2006 (Walle, 2010; World Tour Organisation, 2008).
- 10 See: <http://www.tourismethiopia.org>, <http://www.abysiniantours.com>, <http://www.getts.com.et> and <http://www.greenlandethiopia.com/eng>.
- 11 All personal names are pseudonyms in this article.