

REFLECTIONS ON A JOURNEY THROUGH THE SOUTHERN OMO VALLEY, ETHIOPIA

Tim Forssman

The southern Omo region is a social melting pot. Here, the cultural frontier is not a point at which groups arrive and interact, but a normative condition within which groups constantly manifest and maintain their identities (Brittain et al. 2013). This does not imply that group identity is meaningless; it is in fact a dynamic and changing unit of cohesion providing a rich source of belonging (see Abbink 2000: 3 and Brittain et al. 2013). Travelling through the southern Omo, one is immediately aware of the distinction between, for example, the Hamar and the Mursi people, and the elaborate measures to which people go to identify themselves with their community in a unique manner.

It is perhaps so because in this region, spanning some 113 000 km², there are about 1,3 million people and 45 distinct tribes (Michael et al. 2005). These groups regularly exchange goods, share resources and engage in violent conflict (Brittain et al. 2013), all within a harsh environment that requires traditional and specific coping mechanisms for survival (Admasu et al. 2010). In this paper I describe my recent journey through the lower Omo Valley where I visited various tribal groups and witnessed a Hamar bull-jumping ceremony. The aim with this article is to present African life-systems found elsewhere on the continent that might reflect certain aspects archaeologists identify in our own prehistoric records.

Before proceeding, a comment on the role of tourism on the southern Omo landscape. Visitors have, in some instances, altered traditional life-ways, causing social, cultural and material change within affected communities. For example, the Mursi have altered their mobility patterns to settle near main roads where they can attract paying tourists. They have also established a 'chief'. He has no power within Mursi society but is there simply to maintain tourist expectations of village life. Much of what one sees as a visitor is thus created intentionally to conform to tourist expectations (Régi 2014). Other issues include the emphasis people might place on certain aspects of society deemed of greater interest or shock value to visitors, such as violence, gender abuse or poverty. It is important to acknowledge this critical view and be aware that while in some cases tourists bring in much needed income, there is also a negative result from these interactions.

Tim Forssman obtained his PhD through the University of Oxford and is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pretoria. tim.forssman@gmail.com.



Hamar women preparing animal hides outside a residential hut. Note the cowrie shells, beads and metal bangles which are permanently fixed to the arm.



A Mursi woman with an elaborately decorated lip-plate and ceremonial wear.

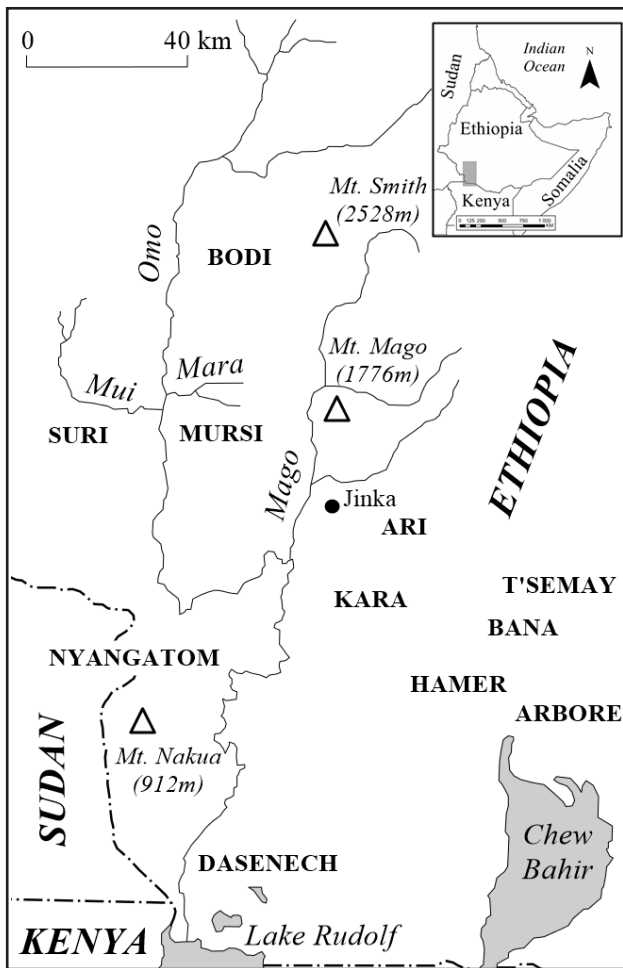


Fig. 1: Map of southern Ethiopia showing the location of the lower Omo Valley and tribal areas

The Hamer, their neighbours and the bull jumping ceremony

There are nine distinct groups in the lower Omo: the Bodi, Chai, Dassanetch, Hamer, Kara, Kwegu, Mursi, Nyangatom and Suri. Together, they speak six different languages derived from Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan dialects (Brittain et al. 2013). Such diversity within a small region necessitates trans-group identity, varied forms of mobility and regular cultural interactions, which include inter-marriage, resource sharing and conflict. Only the Hamer and Mursi are discussed in detail here, and to a lesser extent the Kara.

The Hamer, one of the region's largest tribes, are semi-pastoralists living in the mountainous zone of the lower Omo Valley, a dry but tsetse-fly free area. In contrast, Kara territory is along the banks of the Omo River, a fertile zone ideal for cultivation but infested with tsetse flies. This environmental dichotomy provides an interesting framework for interaction between these two groups: Kara families establish close relations with a host Hamer family who take care of their livestock and in return keep most of the milk. Kara livestock owners will visit their bond-friend to

inspect their cattle and might spend extended periods of time in their village. Sometimes the Hamer bond-friend will visit the Kara and when they do they receive sorghum as a gift. This relationship assists in alleviating subsistence pressure during difficult periods, but occasionally results in conflict. This is usually on a small scale and is resolved by the elders (Aredo 2004).

Engrained in Hamer identity, masculinity and social cohesion is the bull-jumping ceremony. It is the most important ceremony amongst the Hamer and in a man's life; it is his rite of passage from boyhood to manhood after which he can own cattle and marry. A shocking aspect of this ceremony to Westerners is the whipping of women, an act encouraged by the community. The scars that this act leaves behind are worn proudly because they demonstrate a women's devotion to men. Often women fight over who is to be whipped first, even stealing the other's whip. Unmarried men who have successfully performed a bull-jumping ceremony, known as *maza*, are the ones in the community that whip the women. In return a *maza* enters into an agreement with the women he has whipped that he will support her if the need arises.

While in Hamer territory I was fortunate to witness a bull-jumping ceremony. On arrival at the village we were introduced to the initiate (*ukuli*) who welcomed us. We then walked through a hut zone into what could roughly be considered the centre of the village, although no kraal existed here and it appeared more like a meeting area. In one area a large group of women were singing and dancing frenetically, jumping in the air at regular intervals and moving in a circle, all the time blowing horns and clapping or rattling metal bells fastened to their legs. The noise was intense and the dancing relentless. This continued for about four hours.

Nearby under a large tree sat the *maza* who were surrounded by various elderly people. Women of various ages approached a single *maza* and taunted and teased him, possibly even pulling or pushing him around. She then handed him a reed, which he usually accepted timidly, and while she riled herself up by jumping or blowing a horn, he whipped her over her shoulder, striking her exposed back. The cut-marks were often deep and have the potential to cause considerable scarring, accentuated by ash and other substances rubbed into the wounds. This continued for many hours and some women were whipped repeatedly, often bringing up to four reeds and handing them to the *maza* one after the other.

Later in the afternoon, all those involved broke from their activities and sat in the shade of the tree drinking coffee and tea. Eventually, the women began singing loudly and this seemed to signal the start of the bull jumping. The entire group moved to an open area and made a large circle enclosing the cattle. It was now the *ukuli's* duty to select the cattle he wished to 'walk' or jump over and he did so with due consideration. If

the cows are too small it might appear that he is uncertain of his abilities and if they are too large he might not succeed. Failure would mean that he cannot marry or own cows and would have to try again the following year. While choosing the cattle, a large group of women sang, danced and prodded the cows into the centre of the circle, with the *maza* running around the outside.

The *ukuli* selected about 12 cows that were lined up shoulder to shoulder and held steady by married men. A calf is placed at the front of the row of cows to assist with his first leap. When ready, the *ukuli* leapt onto the calf and with several strides bounded across the cattle, arms raised in the air so as not to touch one, before returning. This he did four times, making eight runs across the cattle's backs. We were told afterwards that running so often is unusual and that this initiate was making a statement and providing his family with great honour. Eventually one of the elders had to step forward and grab him to stop him from continuing. The cows were then released and all of the women gathered around the initiate singing songs to protect him. At this point the community dispersed into the village where they would gather to feast and continue celebrating for the next three days.

The Mursi in the Mago National Park

Mursi people were made famous by their elaborate lip-plates. These large disks, usually made from clay but also from wood, are decorated in various fashions and sometimes painted. At the age of 15 or 16 a slit is made at the base of a girl's lower lip, which is extended over time by placing increasingly larger lip-plates in the incision. Eventually, the lip-plates become so large that the front lower incisors must be removed, which causes considerable discomfort for the women (Latosky 2006). The origin of the Mursi lip-plate is not clear. One thought is that during the slave trading period the Mursi intentionally mutilated their women to make them unattractive to traders. However, this explanation does not come from Mursi informants and it is now generally not accepted. Today, the lip-plate is an expression of social adulthood, reproductive potential, identity and prestige (Mursi Online 2015).

Lip-plates are not all that the Mursi people are known for. They are renowned locally as an aggressive and unlikable tribe while also possessing great wit and humour. Their tenacity can be seen in the stick-fighting ceremony, said to be the most brutal in the region. Stick-fighting or duelling involves young unmarried men keen to impress girls. A stick or *donga* measuring about 2 m long is used to strike an opponent, who is defeated when he falls to the ground or concedes willingly. Each duellist is adorned with elaborate protective garments known as a duelling kit and includes a thick headdress (Brittain et al. 2013), which also serves a decorative purpose. The ceremonies may involve up to a dozen affiliated clans, not all of whom



Women dancing at the bull jumping ceremony with rattles below their knees, horns and bells.

are considered Mursi. Of interest is Turton's (1994: 17–18) explanation of what it means to be 'Mursi'. He argues that it has less to do with origins than shared experiences and, very importantly, the occupation of what they call 'a cool place' (*bha lalini*): a riverside area with cultivatable zones in which both flood-retreat and cleared woodland agriculture can be practiced. Identity, place and materiality thus become central components of what it means to be Mursi.

The formation of the Mursi therefore has a backdrop rooted in migration. It is in fact one justification for the many wars that the Mursi have faced; they fight not because they want to but because, despite losing lives, it reasserts their territorial position and identity, allowing them to maintain their life-ways (Turton 2007). This conflict is often prompted by mobility, which itself could be linked to resource depletion, earlier conflicts or, as in more recent times, contact with the Western world. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Mursi had settled south of the Mara River. Because of crop failures they moved north to find woodland areas that could be cleared for cultivation, settling in the buffer zone between themselves and the Bodi living north of the Mara River. While at first interactions were peaceful, with some Mursi and Bodi even cultivating fields together, it did not last and during the famine of 1972, and 1973 warfare broke out between these two tribes. Almost immediately a buffer over 30 km wide was established, but localised skirmishes took place within it. The largest battle involved a raid on a Mursi village housing several hundred cattle. The attack was largely successful but the Mursi rallied and pushed the Bodi back north along what is now called the Rotten Path because of all the bodies that were left strewn along it during that particular campaign.

In 1975, peace was declared and each group performed cleansing rituals along their newly established borders. Another tribe, the Nyangatom, attacked the Mursi in 1987 in apparent retaliation for the Mursi slaughter of a group of Nyangatom pastoralists, which itself was in response to an earlier

attack on a Mursi child. Between 500 and 1 000 Mursi were killed in the attack, mostly women and children. In addition to periodic conflicts, the Mursi are frequently raided when taking their livestock to pasture by the Hamari, a collective term for the Hamar, Bashada and Bana. Typically these result in the loss of both cattle and human life, and impose particular strain on Mursi livelihoods. Men only marry at the age of 28 so that during their physical prime they can defend Mursi livestock and life-ways (Turton 2007). It is clear that life in the Omo Valley is filled with perils constantly threatening traditional life-systems.

Since 2009, a large-scale archaeological and anthropological project has sought to explore the history of the lower Omo, but in particular that of the Mursi people (see Brittain et al. 2013). One of their more intriguing finds is large megalithic platforms that dot the landscape in the northern Aurichukgirong area. Each platform, varying from 2 m to 26 m in diameter, is composed of concentric rings made of large rounded rocks. The purpose of these structures is not yet certain, but suggestions made by Mursi people range from hut or sleeping platforms to burials. Several excavations have revealed a concentration of lithic debris and faunal remains in the centre of the platforms, possibly supporting the claim that they were hut floors (Brattain et al. 2013). This find will likely yield more evidence as excavations continue.

Reflections

Travelling through the southern Omo region provides one with a sense of great contrast between the lives of those who live there and that of our own. A visit is sure to enrich the observer with a deep realism, but one not entirely pleasant. Habitat destruction from the Gibe III dam development and large-scale agricultural enterprises that include sugar, cotton, oil palm and maize, as well as the introduction of sophisticated weapons, have all had a devastating effect on life-ways in the southern Omo. The reach of the modern world is taking a firm grasp on the ripe fruits the Rift Valley has to offer but does unfortunately not appear willing to share with local tribes. Reports of crimes against humanity and, rape accusations are increasing, and people are imprisoned with little explanation. Some of



A Kara man with the lower Omo Valley in the background. This gentleman sat here knowing he would attract eager photographers willing to pay for an image.



Image 6: A young Mursi girl wearing ceremonial wear including a bell and warthog tusks.

these atrocities are being committed not only by local police and labourers, but by the Ethiopian military currently tasked to protect foreign investments in the area (Survival International 2015). While this taints the image of the region, it still remains home to many incredibly vibrant cultures that, even though threatened, are resisting change and maintaining parts of their own way of life.

Acknowledgements

I thank Tau Anthropological Safaris for inviting me to partake in this excursion, and in particular Lee Gutteridge, Adam Riley, Henok Tsegaye and the various communities we visited.

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