Lip-plates and the people who take photographs

Uneasy encounters between Mursi and tourists in southern Ethiopia

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The supposed historical link between lip-plates and the activities of slave traders is an idea that goes back to colonial times. In an article in the September 1938 issue of National Geographic Magazine, C. and M. Thaw report meeting women with large plates in both their upper and lower lips near Fort Archambault, on the River Chari, about 400 miles southeast of Lake Chad, in what was then French Equatorial Africa (see Figure 8):

Here both the upper and lower lips of girl babies are pierced and small wooden plugs inserted into the holes. As they grow up, these holes are gradually increased in size until they reach the dimensions of large soup plates... This form of disfigurement was begun centuries ago to discourage slave raiders, the French Administrator told us. Why it didn’t discourage the young men of the tribe, as well, we will never know. (Thaw & Thaw 1938: 357)

This ‘explanation’ of the lip-plate, as a ‘form of disfigurement’, tells us more about the assumptions and values of those who find it persuasive than it does about the practice which it is supposed to explain. One obvious problem with it is that lip-plates are unique neither to Africa, nor to women. Amongst the Kayapo of Brazil, for example, senior men wear ‘a saucer-like disc some six centimetres across’ (Turner, 1980: 115) in the lower lip.

The lip-plug, which reaches such a large size among older men, is incontestably the most striking piece of Kayapo finery. Only males have their lips pierced. This happens soon after birth, but at first only a string of beads with a bit of shell is placed in the hole to keep it open. After initiation, young bachelors begin to put progressively larger wooden pins through the hole to enlarge it. This gradual process continues through the early years of adulthood, but accelerates when a man graduates to the senior male grade of ‘fathers-of-many-children’ (ibid.: 120-21)

As Turner points out, the boundary of the body, the skin, is everywhere treated as the boundary of the biological individual and as ‘the frontier of the social self’ (ibid.: 112). When seen in this light, the lip-plate worn by Mursi women is an expression of female social adulthood and reproductive potential. It is analogous not only to the lip-plate worn by a Kayapo man, which marks his fully adult status, but also to the penis sheath that is ‘bestowed’ on a Kayapo boy at puberty and which ‘symbolises the collective appropriation of male powers of sexual reproduction for purposes of social reproduction’ (ibid.: 119). We cannot know why the stretching of the lower lip is used, among the Mursi, to symbolize female social adulthood – or rather, given the ‘performative’ role of such symbolism (Austin, 1982), to make girls into adults – any more than we can know why Mursi men do not wear penis sheaths. But the occurrence of lip-stretching in other parts of the world, amongst both men and women, and the universal use of body decoration and alteration as a kind of bridge between the biological and social selves, makes it at least implausible to explain the practice amongst the Mursi as no more than a response to a particular set of historical circumstances. For if we were to do this, we would then have to search for different sets of historical circumstances to explain the occurrence of the practice in other, geographically and culturally widely diverse settings.

Another reason for rejecting this historical explanation is that it is not one the Mursi themselves appear to have heard of – any more than they make a connection between the size of a woman’s lip-plate and the size of her bridewealth. When one asks a Mursi woman why she stretched her lip, she usually replies, simply and predictably, with a version of the phrase ‘It is our custom’. Pressing a bit further one might be told that it makes a woman into a fully-fledged adult, like her mother. A man might say that it is good to see his wife wearing her lip-plate when she comes to give him his daily meal of sorghum porridge, as he sits in the evening with the other

Fig. 2. A full-page advertisement by the Ethiopian National Tourist Organization (NTO), taken from Selamta, the in-flight magazine of Ethiopian Airlines (Vol. 19, No. 1, 2002, p. 36).

Fig. 3. Nga Mokonyi, photographed at Koibatha on the River Omo in December 1969, a month after her lip had been cut.
2. All girls have their four lower incisors removed as children, which is necessary to enable their eventual lip-plates to fit.
3. In a book of photographs by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, the caption to a photograph of a ‘Surma’ woman, wearing a large lip-plate, reads: ‘The size of the lip-plate indicates the number of cattle that a young man must pay for her dowry [sic]. This bride wears a plate symbolising the bride-price of seventy-five cattle’ (2000: 66).
4. It has been suggested to me that this does not rule out the possibility that a girl might continue to stretch her lip to take a plate of a size that would ‘meet the agreed payment’. This is logically possible but empirically highly unlikely, not least because, in visits to the Mursi spanning the last 30 years, I have never heard any connection made between the size of a woman’s lip-plate and the size of her bridewealth.
5. It is said that if a girl were to be married as a virgin, any intercourse before her lip was fully healed, she would run the risk of the lip breaking.
6. I am grateful to David Wason for bringing this example to my attention.
7. It is interesting that a photographic image came to be applied to perhaps the most blatant expression of this relationship between prisoners and warders, in the steel cages of the US Government’s ‘Camp Xray’, at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.
8. If one wishes to date the beginning of this process, one could go further than choose the early years of the last century, when the Ethiopian Emperor, Menelik II, was extending his control over the southwest.
9. The following excerpt, which is taken from unedited documentary material, was first published in Turton 1992 (pp. 286-7). A few minor alterations have been made to the translation in this version.
10. This is the name the Mursi give to the descendants of northern Ethiopians who colonized the southwest of the country in the early years of the last century. Arinyatun is here referring to the tour company drivers who bring the tourists from Addis Ababa and/or Jinka.

Despite the strength of government opposition to the practice, however, it is almost certainly indirect pressure that will be most effective in causing it to be abandoned. This comes mainly from the growing realization amongst the Mursi themselves that the lip-plate is seen as a mark of men of the settlement. And for both men and women, the lip-plate is a powerful visual marker of Mursi identity. For a Mursi woman, not to have a pierced lip is to run the risk of being mistaken for a Kwegu, a client group of hunters who live along the banks of the Omo, while to have a pierced but not stretched lip is to run the risk of being mistaken for a Bodi, northern neighbours of the Mursi, with whom they are frequently at war (Bodi women insert small plugs in their lower lips). There are, however, powerful pressures, both direct and indirect, on Mursi women to give up the practice, and these pressures will undoubtedly prove irresistible.

Direct pressure comes from the government. Since the years of the ‘Derg’, the Soviet-backed government of Mengistu Haile Mariam (1975-91), government officials have been hammering home the message to the Mursi that the lip-plate represents an ‘uncivilized’ custom which must be abandoned if they are to be ‘developed’. As yet there are no administrative centres or police posts in Mursi territory, but the present government seems no less intent than its predecessor on stamping out this ‘harmful traditional practice’. One regional government official is reported, for example, to have made a particularly gruesome (and presumably empty) threat at a meeting held for local administrative staff. Once there was a police post in Mursi territory, he said, any girl who decided to stretch her lip would have her lower lip cut off entirely, to make an example of her.

Despite the strength of government opposition to the practice, however, it is almost certainly indirect pressure that will be most effective in causing it to be abandoned. This comes mainly from the growing realization amongst the Mursi themselves that the lip-plate is seen as a mark of their backwardness by outsiders and that it will help to prolong their exclusion from the economic and social benefits of incorporation into the Ethiopian state. In particular, it will be an obstacle to the education of girls. Here I should mention the recent activities of Protestant missionaries who, since 1989, have established themselves in the Mago Valley, where a group of Mursi had migrated a few years earlier because of drought. The missionaries have not, as far as I know, spoken out specifically against the lip-plate. But their converts, who are at present concentrated around the mission station and may number in the region of 50 individuals, are likely to be at the forefront of efforts, coming from within the community itself, to abandon such ‘traditional’ practices and customs.

The tourists
On the one hand, then, the lip-plate is prized by Mursi men and women as a mark of their cultural identity and political autonomy. On the other hand, they recognize that outsiders see it as a mark of their backwardness, which must be abandoned if they are to gain the benefits of ‘development’. This ambivalence is heightened by another and, at first sight, contradictory message about the lip-plate which has been reaching the Mursi in recent years, through the activities of tourists. For, while tourists are presumed to share the general disdain for, not to say disgust at, the practice shown by outsiders, they nevertheless come great distances mainly, it seems, in order to photograph this symbol of Mursi backwardness.

Mursi territory lies within and between the Omo and Mago National Parks (see figure 9), three days drive and 940 km from Addis Ababa, over progressively rougher and more difficult roads. During the last ten years, increasing numbers of European and North American tourists have made their way into this area, attracted by the image Presented to them in tourist brochures of one of the last ‘wildernesses’ in Africa, inhabited by wild animals, naked warriors and women with stretched lips. In fact, they rarely encounter large game animals and appear to be more attracted by the opportunity to see and photograph the local people. Mainly because of the lip-plates worn by Mursi women, the Mursi are high on, if not at the top of, the tourists’ list of ‘must-see’ attractions. The lip-plate has therefore become an economic asset for Mursi women and their families. From this point of view, the bigger the lip-plate the better. As one man jokingly put it to me, with deliberate exaggeration, ‘If your wife has a large lip-plate, she can fill your cattle compound’.

And yet the encounter between Mursi and tourists is clearly a tense and uneasy one for both sides. The Mursi seem determined not to let the tourists forget that they have come for no other purpose than to ‘take’ photographs, while the tourists seem intent on getting these photographs they need, buying a few artefacts (such as bracelets, baskets and, of course, lip-plates) and making their getaway as quickly as possible. For the onlooker it is a depressing and disturbing sight, to see the women, alternating as quickly as possible. For the onlooker it is a depressing and disturbing sight, to see the women, alternating between aggressive demands for money and sullen passivity, as a phalanx of video cameras pan up and down their bodies, and to see the tourists selecting particular ‘specimens’ from the crowd to be filmed and photographed. This is an encounter which is almost entirely stripped of any form of ‘normal’ social intercourse. As Abbbink writes of Suri interactions with tourists, the meeting between Mursi and tourists ‘is more of a “confrontation” than a normal social interaction’ (2000: 8).

Such confrontations have made the Mursi famous and infamous at the same time. Here is a quotation from an article by Amanda Jones that appeared in the Travel section of the Sunday Times, under the heading ‘Tribes and tribulations’:

...
The final leg of our journey was to the Mursi people. In southern Ethiopia, this is the tribe who strike fear into the hearts of northern Ethiopians and tourists alike. We’d heard so many lamentable tales about their behaviour that we didn’t really know what to expect. The problem is that you can’t possibly come all this way and miss the Mursi, famous for the lip plates the women wear in their lower lips.

Because of their reputation, most visitors make a six-hour round trip drive from Mago National Park to see them. They come tearing down the road, jump out of their cars with cameras blazing and Birr aflying, create a riot, get scared, jump back into the car, lock the doors and take off again after 15 minutes. The Mursi have this down to a fine art. They encircle the ferengie, manhandle them a little, exact inflated sums for photos, force them to buy chipped lip plates and then whip up such a racket that the tourists retreat with only a few terrible snapshot of lip plates looming inches from their lens to show for their expensive foray into Mursi land. (Jones, 1999)

‘Lamentable tales’ told about the Mursi are nothing new. The first Europeans to write about them were Lamberto Vannutelli and Carlo Citerni, members of an Italian Geographical Society expedition, led by Vittorio Bottego, which followed the left bank of the Omo down to Lake Turkana in 1896. In their official account of the expedition, Vannutelli and Citerni write of the Mursi as follows.

Living in a country that has been, up to now, unknown both to the white man and the surrounding blacks, it is easy to understand why their way of life has remained little different from that of animals… The women are deformed and ugly and quite naked except for a narrow piece of skin around their waists. Some have large holes in the ears and lower lip into which they put wooden discs reaching a diameter of five or six centimetres… This savage tribe has detestable tendencies and bestial habits. And yet they do not have a ferocious nature and are not as warlike as the highlanders. But, in compensation for this, their ability to hide themselves in the bush and their instinctive cunning makes them audacious thieves. (1899: 320-23, my translation)

The same theme of a general lack of socialized, rule-governed behaviour is echoed in any number of present-day travellers’ accounts, such as the one quoted above from the ‘Lonely Planet’ guide, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. This has a boxed section, said to be based on the author’s diary, entitled ‘A trip to visit the Mursi’. Here is an extract.

‘OK, Ten minutes and then we are out of there’, Abraha the driver said with great authority.


‘You don’t know the Mursi. They are thieves’ he said.

‘Thieves!’ raising his voice for extra effect…

‘They would even take the shoes from your feet, I tell you, Abraha continued.

We were off that day to the lower Omo River in southern Ethiopia, home to several Nilotic-Omotic peoples, including the Mursi, considered among the most fascinating and colourful tribes on earth.

‘Of all of them, the Mursi, they are the bad ones’, Abraha went on. ‘…They are savages, savages!’…

As we pulled into the first Mursi village at last, Abraha gave some final words of warning: ‘So remember, we take off all watches, we lock all doors, and we stay awake. Ten minutes’ he added firmly. (2000: 242-3)

The photographs
One way to explain these ‘lamentable tales’ would be to focus on what Susan Sontag calls the ‘predatory’ nature of the ‘photographic act’.

[T]here is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. (1979: 14, emphasis added)
Sontag is talking here of the photographic act in general. But when we come to look specifically at photographs taken by Westerners of non-Westerners or, more generally, at photographs taken by the rich of the poor, her point seems even more compelling. This is because the power differential between photographer and human subject is here that much more obvious. As James Faris writes, in his book on photography and the Navajo, ‘To stand on some absolute right to make photographs is to resort to the most western and capitalist of foundations… the absolute right to be able to see anyone, anywhere. It is to stand on power’ (1996: 306). Christopher Pinney makes the same point by drawing an analogy between photography and the exercise of surveillance, as expressed in Michel Foucault’s Panoptical model of power relations in the modern state. In the Panopticon prison, the prisoners are always visible to the warders in their central observation tower. The warders know all about the prisoners but, for the prisoners, the warders live in a relatively unknown world. ‘In photography’, writes Pinney, ‘the photographer is invisible behind his camera, while what he sees is rendered completely visible’ (1992: 76). There is no doubt about the power differential between the Mursi and tourists. Nor is there any doubt that the Mursi see the act of taking photographs as a predatory one, an act by which they are captured and appropriated, an act by which they become, as one man put it in a conversation I quote from below, the ‘children’ of the tourists. But this does not explain why tourists so frequently single out the Mursi, from amongst all their neighbours, as rapacious, aggressive and generally ‘difficult’ to deal with. To explain this we need to take into account not only the predatory nature of the photographic act, and the unequal power relationship upon which it is based, but also the motivation of the tourists for visiting the Mursi in the first place. For they come, above all, to see and photograph not their houses, ceremonies, rituals and other social activities but their bodies. And not just their bodies, but a bodily alteration which symbolizes, to the Mursi their Mursiness, and to the tourists, their backwardness.

The Mursi know that the lip-plate is seen as a sign of their backwardness by powerful outsiders, whether government officials or tourists. They also know, therefore, that the tourist who travel such great distances to obtain pictures of lip-plates are not doing so because they admire and respect the custom. It is not something they would wish to emulate – to see their own daughters practising – but, on the contrary, something they see as epitomizing the gulf between the rich, technologically advanced and morally superior world they inhabit and the poor, technologically backward and morally inferior world inhabited by the Mursi. The pleasure that tourists derive from this activity, therefore, is an exploitative pleasure, one that combines fascination with repulsion.

It is also the pleasure of consumerism: the tourists spend money on what they do not need, while the Mursi stand in front of the camera to be photographed, appropriated and objectified as archetypal primitives only because they need the money. An analogy with prostitution seems compelling. The Mursi – men and women, though mainly women – make commodities of their bodies like prostitutes and, like prostitutes, attempt to salvage some dignity from the commercial transaction. The Mursi do not, of course, never letting the customer forget that this is a straight-forward commercial transaction. The Mursi do not, of course, describe their interactions with tourists in these terms. But as one watches them, standing sullenly as the cameras click away, and visibly flinching as the video cameras approach from different angles, it is difficult not to conclude that they feel both violated and demeaned.

The ‘discomforts of localized existence’}

In his article on tourism amongst the Suri, Abbink rightly points out that ‘[i]n its present, late twentieth century form, tourism is the expression of a particular kind of consumer identity with a global and globalizing impact. It emanates from societies that are relatively powerful and wealthy. Communities and places visited by tourists often undergo unforeseen changes…’ (2000: 1). The main change experienced by the Mursi over the 30 years I have known them is a conceptual one, and it is a change to which tourism has made a powerful recent contribution.
Thirty years ago, the Mursi I knew still saw themselves as occupying a central position in relation to the outside world, not only geographically but also morally. That is, they saw the norms and values which gave meaning and purpose to their lives, and to their own and their children’s future, as springing from, or being located in, the physical space they occupied. They were, in this sense, at the physical and moral centre of the world. Over the years, and especially since the regular arrival of car-loads of tourists, they have come to realize that the centre which they once saw themselves inhabiting has, as it were, slipped away from them. It has moved elsewhere, although they do not know exactly where, and they are revealed to themselves as a small, localized, poor, technologically backward and relatively powerless group, living on the margins of the Ethiopian state. They have come to suffer what Zygmunt Bauman calls ‘the discomforts of localized existence’.

Being local in a globalized world is a sign of social deprivation and degradation. The discomforts of localized existence are compounded by the fact that with public spaces removed beyond the reaches of localized life, localities are losing their meaning-generating and meaning-negotiating capacity and are increasingly dependent on sense-giving and interpreting actions which they do not control (Bauman 1998: 2-3).

The verdicts of right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, proper and improper, useful and useless may only descend from on high, from regions never to be penetrated by any but the most inquisitive eye; the verdicts are unquestionable since no question may be meaningfully addressed to the judges and since the judges left no address... and no one can be sure where they reside. No room is left for the ‘local opinion leaders’; no room is left for the ‘local opinion’ as such (ibid.: 25-26).

Bauman is here describing the end state of a process which still has some way to go for the Mursi, and which started long before I first met them. I fact, large areas of Mursi life are still controlled by values and opinions that emanate from within Mursi society itself. But the realization that they are a small, localized group, ‘dependent on sense-giving and interpreting actions which they do not control’ is beginning to make perceptible inroads into the collective imagination of the Mursi. As Don Dunham writes of the Maale, who live in the nearby Ethiopian highlands and for whom this process is further advanced, ‘what has been altered are peoples’ imaginations – their sense of their place in the world and the shape of their pasts and their futures’ (1999: xviii).

The last word

I shall give the last word to the Mursi, by quoting from an interview with three Mursi men, conducted during the making of a television documentary in 1991 (Woodhead, 1991). I had known these men for as long as I had known the Mursi. One was the priest (Komoora), who was the leader of the northern Mursi, Komorakora. One was a relative of Komorakora, Bio-iton-giga, who often acted as a representative of the northern Mursi in their dealings with the government. And one was a younger man, Arinyatuin, who was also used to dealing with government officials. During the course of this interview, with the film camera whirring away behind me, I asked what the Mursi thought about the tourists who were then beginning to penetrate Mursi territory, driving along the motor-track that links the Omo and Mago National Parks.

The resulting exchange contained many ironies, but I shall mention only two. First, what began as an interview with the interviewer asking all the questions for the benefit of the TV audience, turned into a more equal exchange as I was forced to answer my own question – ‘Why do the tourists take photographs?’ – and thereby to confront my own behaviour and motivations. The answer that was eventually dragged out of me could, of course, have served equally well as an explanation of what I and the film crew were doing. Second, my question gave the three men a chance to tell their own ‘lamentable tales’ about the tourists – and, by extension, about ‘the world of the globally mobile’ (Bauman 1998: 88) which the tourists inhabit and from which the Mursi are excluded. Commenting on the failure of tourists to pay what the Mursi regard as a fair price for photographs, Arinyatuin is led, with more justice than he could have realized, to brand all white people as ‘thieves’.

DT: When the tourists come up and down this road to the Omo and take photographs, and when we come and film you like this, what do you say about it, privately?

Arinyatuin: We say ‘It’s their thing. They are that sort of people – people who take photographs. It’s the whites’ thing’.

What do we know about it? You are the ones who know. We just sit here and they take photographs. There’s one [a Polaroid photograph] that, as you look at it, you can see your own body appearing. If it’s bad, tell us.

DT: I’m trying to find out what you think, in your stomachs.

Arinyatuin: In our stomachs? We’ve no idea. They can’t speak our language, so we can’t ask them why they are doing it. We can ask you, because you speak Mursi. They come with Kuchumba,10 who just sit in the cars. When the tourists have taken their photographs, they drive off.

We say, ‘Is it just that they want to know who we are, or what? They must be people who don’t know how to behave.’ Even old women come and totter about taking photographs. ‘Is this how whites normally behave?’ That’s what we say.

DT: (Laughing) So that’s what you say!

Bio-iton-giga: Goloimneri – why do they do it? Do they want us to become their children, or what? What do they want the photographs for?

DT: They come because they see you as different and strange people. They go back home and tell their friends that they’ve been on a long trip, to Mursiland. They say: ‘Look, here are the people we saw.’ They do it for entertainment.

Komorakora: Recently, the Administrator at Hana told us, ‘Build a nice big house, with a fence – a big house, well built. The vets can use it when they treat the cattle and the tourists can photograph it. The tourists come to enjoy themselves. They can sleep in the house and go back the next day.’

That’s what he said – what’s his name?

Bio-iton-giga: Dawit Shumbulu.

Komorakora: Yes, that’s it, Dawit Shumbulu. That’s what he said. We said to each other, ‘Are we here just for our amusement?’ Now you’ve said the same, so that must be it.

Bio-iton-giga: If they are going to take photographs, they should give us a lot of money shouldn’t they? But they don’t.

DT: That’s bad. Is that how they behave?

Arinyatuin: Yes, we are always arguing with them. They cheat us.

Bio-iton-giga: They’ll take a lot of photographs, give us a single note, and then get in their cars and drive off.

DT: Don’t you complain?

Bio-iton-giga: Of course we do. But they dive into their cars and escape.

Arinyatuin: They are thieves, aren’t they? White people are thieves.

DT: Yes, it’s bad. What about the Kuchumba – they are different from the whites, aren’t they?

Arinyatuin: Yes. They don’t take photographs. They just ask for food. ‘Give us a goat to eat,’ they say.

So we just give them one, When a lot of them come, it’s for tax.

DT: Don’t you have tax in your country?

Arinyatuin: Yes, we do.

Arinyatuin: There’s none of this going round taking photographs with the Kuchumba – they are more like us. This photography comes from your country, [smiling] where the necklace beads grow. Give us a car and we’ll go and take photographs of you.