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Abstract

This article is based on long-term anthropological fieldwork among the semi-nomad Mursi people of South-Western Ethiopia. I have investigated different underlying meanings of local performances for tourist audience. Here, my aim is to demonstrate the need to pay attention to the complexity of these local performances in small-scale African communities. I argue that the different acts that local people put on for their visitors are not cognitively homogeneous performances but carry complex cultural meanings. I propose that anthropological studies of 'tribal', 'cultural' or 'ethnic' tourism should pay more attention to the different tactics that local people apply in order to control tourist consumption and performance.

Keywords

Africa, anthropology, Ethiopia, mimicry, Mursi people, nomadism, Omo River, performance, photography, social tactics

Introduction

Since the performance turn in tourism studies in the 1990s (Coleman and Cragg, 2002; Edensor, 1998; Minca and Oakes, 2006), social research ontologies rather focus on 'acting and doing' than the semiotic readings of tourist sites (Crouch, 2009; Haldrup and Larsen, 2010). However, although the theoretical frame is well developed (Bærenholdt et al., 2004; Crouch, 1999, 2010; Edensor, 2001; Rojek and Urry, 1997; Urry, 1995) for understanding tourist enactments in 'touristscapes' (Edensor, 2009), it gets rather blurred when we want to understand the hosts' responses to tourist performances. Although host society reactions have played a vital role since early tourist studies (Abram, 1997; Graburn, 1976; Smith [1977] 1989; Tucker, 1997; Van den Berghe, 1994), scholars have rarely distinguished clear identities so as to better understanding of host performances.

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Tourists perform their activities in response to local acts and vice versa; the two groups of actions cannot exist without each other. Host performances are often hardly distinguishable from guests' enactments, although there are cases when it is doubtful that the two enactments use similar cultural techniques. In this article, I suggest that there are contexts where hosts' behaviour requires different theoretical attention than the guests' performances. In certain situations, as with the case described in the following, the term 'performance' acquires different connotations if we scrutinise local acts separately from tourist acts. There are important differences between host and guest performances, especially in tourist sites where the roles of the guests and hosts are clearly differentiated and where everyday local practices are shaped by quandaries produced by economic imperatives. In small-scale, localised non-Western¹ societies, the cultural techniques people apply to camouflage identity marking or economic reproduction are varied, and the word 'performance' can cover different social strategies and tactics that tourism studies has failed to explicate successfully.

In Africa, some parts of Asia or South America, people encounter each other under the label of 'ethnic', 'tribal' or 'cultural' tourism, and the modalities of local actions are embedded in various interests and desires within a heterogeneous cultural system. Edward Bruner has bridged the concepts of performance and tourism in a non-Western social setting, framing host-guest interactions by using the concept of 'tourist realism'. In his text (Burner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1994) on the East-African pastoral Maasai, locals create theatrical reality in order to control tourists' movement and consumption. In tourist realism, hosts and guests are aware of the fine differences between the actuality and virtuality, between constructed experience and authenticity. This tourist realism can only exist in a theatre (almost literally) where the audience, despite their 'questioning gaze', are able to distinguish acting agents *through* their performances. Tourists do not expect authenticity but a re-enactment of the authentic, something past, a dead form of human culture (MacCannell, 1992). Because of this unsaid agreement between hosts and guests, tourists often accept a theatrical setting where performing culture (primitivism, savagery, cannibalism etc.) is a created political and historical drama. Tourist realism postulates that well-defined formal, spatial power strategies create a system where temporal social relationships gradually become permanent. Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's concept was created in a post-colonial tourist setting, which tried to re-enact a political fantasy world where the strategic performances were based on implicit social principles. The symbolic order of these principles was derived from the dialectical relationship of historical (post-colonial), national (Kenya as a new independent country) and local (a farm of British descendants employing indigenous Maasai dancers) identities. In a situation like this, phrases such as 'theatre', 'stage' or 'play' require an established power relationship between the actors and the audience. This open, well-defined form of relationship brings the site alive. Here, the roles and intentions of the performance are all known by *both* sides. In the theatre and stage, people do not want to trick the audience because everyone knows that they are only *playing* trickery. In the theatre, the audience are aware that what they see is not part of the actors' everyday life because there is no theatre stage in everyday life (except in theatres). However, there are situations where the locals want to make the audience believe that what they see is a section of their everyday life. Here, they do not just play with trickery, but really would like to trick the

audience. In such cases, the terms 'theatre' and 'stage' are inappropriate as there are no theatrical stage settings in these situations.

This article asks how we can understand local performances if there is no established locus of control and no strategic rationalisation of power relationship that characterises local performances, as in contexts of tourist realism. I reflect on a situation where a small-scale, localised, politically and economically weak African society performs for their guests in a space in which government, police or any organisational control do not exist. Instead of using the concepts of theatre and stage, I argue that in this case, the intention of the performance is to *make the audience believe* that what they see is actually part of local peoples' everyday lives, and explores how locals achieve this goal without playing on an imagined or real theatre stage? Besides legitimate strategies, various tactics underpin local performances in settings where non-Western communities host Western visitors. Pretence, camouflage, 'face' protection, trickery or mimicry are just a few tactics that local people apply in tourist encounters, and I am interested in the different modalities of these tactics. In order to elucidate my argument, I borrow the concept of *la perruque* from De Certeau (1988).

I understand *la perruque* as a material device (the wig, the masquerade, the body paint, the mask, the adornment, the costume and the 'traditional' cloth) and also as a metaphor for a tactic. Tactics are different from strategies. As De Certeau (1988) defined them, 'tactics do not obey the law of the place, for they are not defined or identified by it' (p. 29). In this sense, an act of tourist realism is part of a strategy and not a tactic. Yet, locals in tourist contact zones must develop different tactics instead of treating local performance as a homogenous social institution. Instead, local performances are often culturally multilayered and much more complex and difficult to 'do' than well-practiced routines, especially in places where people have difficulties in reading each other's behaviour.

One of the best fields to observe the complexities of local tactics is the 'ethnic' or 'tribal' tourist sites where local people encounter visitors from Western countries for a short period of time. The ethnographic research that this article is based on was carried out among the Mursi people of South-Ethiopia in 2008 and 2009. During this time, I observed nearly 100 tourist encounters and conducted dozens of interviews with local people and tourists.

The Mursi

The Mursi are a semi-nomadic group, numbering about 8000, who live in the lower Omo Valley in South-Western Ethiopia (Figure 1). Their economy is based on cattle keeping and on rain-fed and flood-retreat cultivation along the Omo River. People regard cattle as the most important thing in their lives, and their main economic and cultural aim is to keep as many as possible. People hold their animals in high esteem, and this is responsible for their nomadic way of life.

The Mursi men all belong to one of the age grades that divide the population and identify their everyday lives, behaviours and social interactions. The first two grades, the *changalay* and the *dhongai*, contain Mursi children from their birth until their mid-teens, when they move into the *teru* age grade whose ages range from the mid-teens to the late

20s. The *teru* live together in the cattle camp, take care of the animals, pay attention to unmarried girls and prepare themselves for stick fights. There is no such age grade system among the females, but older Mursi women are also respected by the younger generation. When Mursi girls reach puberty, their lower lip is stretched and a small wooden stick is placed in it. In time, they widen this hole with bigger and bigger sticks, then with larger and larger clay or wooden lip-plates. As Mursi women say, this is their custom, and how they express their identity, strength and belonging.² Women without lip-plates are sometimes derogatively called *ngidi*, which is the name of the Kwegu, a neighbouring group of people without cattle. The lip-plate has become the emblem of the Mursi as a social group, and most tourists would like to photograph Mursi women with big lip-plates. Although the Ethiopian government began to market Ethiopia to tourists in the 1980s, it was not until the end of the socialist Haile Mariam Mengistu's Derg regime in 1992 that tourism started to develop in Mursiland. At this time, the general infrastructure was improved through the whole lower Omo Valley. Due to this, the Ethiopian central government was gradually able to extend its political control over the territory, which was largely politically unrestrained earlier. In the late 1990s, Western-style tourism marketing began to operate in the country and increasing numbers of tourists from Europe, the United States, Israel and Japan³ were able to visit and photograph the Mursi and the neighbouring Suri (Abbink, 2000; Turton, 2004).

Solbu: a model of a nomad settlement

Solbu is a spot along the dusty sand road between Jinka and Hana (Figure 2), where the Mursi have established a settlement for their everyday encounters with tourists, a



Figure 2. *Solbu*, a nomad settlement along the road.

Photo: Tamás Régi.

well-constructed space for these special human interactions. Ethiopian tour operators⁴ and guides are aware of the place as it is comparatively easy to approach by four-wheel drives (4WDs) and ideal for a short and safe tourist visit. Remarkably, the semi-nomadic Mursi community provided an identity for *Solbu* by signposting the settlement. They placed a piece of a pierced green jerry can on a wooden stick at the entrance of the settlement. People called this road sign *warkata*, a word that has two meanings among the Mursi: either 'sign' or 'write'.⁵ Although this sign of differentiation and symbol of demarcation from other Mursi settlements was a unique way of communicating with outsiders, it was not the only way to 'seize' the tourists. *Dil-dil*, another Mursi settlement about 2 miles from *Solbu*, devised a more effective 'tourist trap'. Here Mursi men often stretched a rope, made by long plant stalks tied together, across the road so that when tourist cars arrived they had to make the choice to either stop or confront the holders of the rope.

Solbu was 'established' around 2004 by *Gorogora Aregidanga*⁶ or, as everyone knew him, *Balsham*, a Mursi man in his middle age. However, the place where *Solbu* stands now was a meeting point between tourists and the Mursi from the end of the 1990s. When I first visited Mursiland in 1999, I met people there, and the area was only a cultivation site containing a few abandoned huts. Later, permanent huts were built in response to the growing demands from emerging tourism at the beginning of the new millennium. *Balsham* called his friends and relatives to live there and created a place where the Mursi could easily meet tourists, just next to the sandy road, not too far from Jinka, close to the Mago Bridge, before the road takes a steep bend towards *Maganto* and *Hana*.

Solbu smoothly works as a cultural stage, but it is certainly not a socially homogenised space. Which nomad settlement is? Due to the high number of constant Mursi and alien visitors, *Solbu* was a relatively crowded settlement compared to other Mursi hamlets, possessing a distinctive social landscape. During the time of my fieldwork, my census contained 13 huts – which meant that 13 wives, husbands and their smaller children lived there constantly, 91 Mursi people altogether. However, these dwellings were not bounded, and I could not take my census for granted, for my field-notes describe peoples' unregulated movement, which also entailed building a new hut for themselves. The basic rule is that the home of a Mursi person is always where his cattle are; yet, as there were no cattle in *Solbu*, husbands, adolescents and adult single males wandered between different settlements and cattle camps, sometimes sleeping in *Solbu*, then venturing to farther places. People kept their livestock in *Mi*, *Mako* or somewhere close to the Mago River. The female population was also mobile, but because of their babies, they were rather more bound to one place. Almost every day, new people arrived and left the settlement. The major immigration was during the early mornings, when people from the neighbouring compounds such as *Hunai*, *Dil Dil*, *Barrege* or *Bele* appeared in *Solbu*. These 'commuters' left *Solbu* only in the late afternoon, when the arrival of tourists was unlikely and when the sun was not so high. There were long-term Mursi guests from farther places like *Mako*, *Maganto* or South Mursiland, who stayed days or sometimes more than a week in *Solbu*. Basically, the impression was that the whole of Mursiland was constantly on the move, and *Solbu* as a tourist space emerged from this constant rambling. The tourists' mobility merged with the movement of the Mursi and *Solbu*, facilitating a fluid yet stable everyday space. For in order to function as a 'touristscape' (Edensor, 2009), *Solbu* needs boundaries. As Stewart (1993) argues, models (e.g.

miniatures) can maintain their function and meaning as long as they have well-defined boundaries that separate them from reality. I think it is a compelling argument and as she says, this is why Lilliput had to be an island. *Solbu* similarly maintains a tension between the inside and the outside; it occupies a space within a wider space. *Solbu* is the village that tourists can visit *in* Mursiland.

What Stewart (1993) writes about the dollhouse also stands for *Solbu*: '(T)he dollhouse is a materialized secret' (p. 60). The space that the Mursi call *Solbu* was a materialised secret for most tourists. Tourists' search for 'authenticity' took different forms. They often started to explore the back region of *Solbu* because they expected a 'real Mursi village' behind it. They said that perhaps there is a 'real place' that exists beyond the tourist settlement, where they can encounter a 'real Mursi', not the 'touristy one'. Behind *Solbu*, there was an area of crops; then a forest belt; then another cropping belt and, finally, the *Usa* River. Some of the visitors walked down to the river then disappointedly turned back without experiencing 'authentic' Mursi everyday life scenes. Some tourists stopped their cars after the Mago Bridge and started to walk towards *Solbu*. Tourists reported that they felt they could be closer to the local people if they were on foot. They walked a couple of miles; some of them did not even enter *Solbu* but continued their trip up to the hill. Most Mursi did not understand this because they thought that tourists had nothing to occupy them on the road, and even if they had, they had cars; so why did they not use them? Once, four tourists walked up to the hills beyond *Solbu* during the hottest part of the day. The Mursi found this act completely unintelligible since they do not walk in the hottest part of the day without any strong reason as these tourists did.

Nevertheless, whenever tourists venture on foot in Mursiland, sooner or later they end up in one of the Mursi settlements where the local people expect them and have prepared their outfit for the encounter. Bodies are painted, local people masquerade themselves and Mursi women alter their faces to trick their foreign visitors.

Altering the human face as local tactic

Nomad body paint. Painting the human body is common in cattle keeper societies in southern Ethiopia, southern Sudan, northern Kenya and northern Uganda. The painting patterns are part of a whole society's aesthetic containing similar animal brands,⁷ body scarification marks and cattle decorations. In everyday life, the Mursi frequently paint their faces and upper body with ash. This, they say, is a form of blessing (*achalli*), a protection against curses, and it keeps sickness and the dreadful away. During short, daily ceremonies, older people often paint other peoples' faces with ash mixed with water, or sometimes, they use a powder derived from the mixture of smashed white stones and water.⁸ Mursi teenage boys regularly cover their entire bodies with mud, which can protect the skin from injuries sustained by the duelling stick during the fight. If a guest arrives, the host, as part of the hospitality ceremony, often puts ash on their guest's face. However, the most elaborate and diverse Mursi body paints that I observed occur when the Mursi encounter tourists.

The Mursi's bodies are transformed before they are put on 'display'. Here, body paint is not a work of art as an external object or a piece of masquerade; there is no divide between the presenter and the presented. The skin surface is both part of the actor's body

and part of the performance, and in this sense, there is no clear ontological boundary between performer and performance. As Stewart (1993) notes in discussing bodily displays, the distance between the artist, the artwork and the audience collapses as the body is the artwork. Every morning, women in *Solbu* start to prepare themselves for the encounters. Men also make themselves ready by painting, but women and kids spend much more time and energy with the preparation. Girls, mothers and daughters, and female relatives help to paint each other's faces and bodies. Women of a similar age work together, smashing red and white stones and chinks and mixing them with water to produce the paints, which are applied to their faces by the use of sticks. Close social bonds are clearly visible as friends and relatives take care of each other and wait for their turn. It is remarkable not only how the act of waiting for tourists generated cooperation between individuals but also how the making of these art products on human bodies showed a form of trust. Painting each other and preparing the other's body for tourist encounters require a fundamental cooperation. An accurate face decoration or a well-shaved head not only makes the owner happy but extols the painter.

Besides being painted white overall, among the females, the most common Mursi body paint pattern for tourists is of white spots on a red base. It can cover the whole face or it can be a red stripe around the face with white spots. Males, especially teenagers, often paint themselves with white palm forms and make the basic *kichoga* pattern into these hand shapes. There are Mursi boys who paint Latin numbers on their upper body. I witnessed this new figurativeness around the tourist-visited Mago Bridge, but I have never seen similar body paint patterns in any other part of Mursiland.

These details about the changing body paints provide a better understanding of the cultural change that tourism generates among the Mursi. In preparing the body for a spectacle, the aestheticisation of the human skin is tactical. Furthermore, the modification of the face can be also achieved in other ways. There were materials that people placed upon themselves only when the tourists arrived. Such items were kept in the huts or in baskets, hanging from the trees where the migrants gathered.

Masquerade. The most important objects in the encounters were the lip-plates. Tourists preferred to photograph females with big lip-plates, which resulted that women with bigger lip-plate were much more successful in producing income than those with smaller lip-plates. A remarkable tactic I have noted is that girls, without stretching their lower lips, often pretended that they had large lip-plates by fastening huge lip-plates to their lower teeth with a small piece of string (Figure 3). Moreover, a further development of this improvisatory disposition was when older women, whose lower lips had already drawn back⁹ also tried to re-stretch their lips by forcing different objects (piece of stone, wood, plastic, etc.) into it. Putting something in the lower lip when tourists were around was so crucial that Mursi women invented 'new lip-plates' if they did not have a real one.

Another, frequently used Mursi material in the encounter was the cattle headdress. This was the object that teenage males made for their favourite cattle, and women put it on their heads when they saw that tourists had arrived. I have completed a list of other materials that Mursi women put on their heads when encountering tourists: leather apron, belt from kauri shell, land-snail festoon, baby skirt, feathers, ankle bracelets (sometimes they were stuck to the above-mentioned belt) and lip-plate. I also saw Kalashnikov,



Figure 3. Young Mursi girls fasten lip-plates to their lower teeth.

Photo: Tamás Régi.

baskets and pots, machete and fake calf¹⁰ on the head of women. When I asked Mursi women why they put these materials on, they explained that they would not be photographed without these things. The appearance of a Mursi woman in front of the tourist camera (see a typical example in Figure 4) was the result of the cultural logic that the Mursi constructed in response to the tourists' expectations. These objects were *la per-ruque*: camouflage of economic tactics, where trickery gives possibility for the socially weak to deploy their force against affluent communities. The Mursi tactically use the magical force that their visitors impute on their imaginary self. The socially weak employ and mobilise the mysterious power that Western tourists attribute to the Mursi. The 'well known truth', which Malinowski once noted and Taussig (1991) dusted, is still valid:

This imputation of mystery and the demonic by the more powerful class to the lower – by men to women, by the civilized to the primitive, by the Christian to the pagan, is breathtaking – such an old notion, so persistent, so paradoxical and ubiquitous. (p. 215).

The real art is to make use of this tendency.

Approaching the tourists

After finishing the paintings and masquerading, people were sitting and chatting with each other, males and females separated, until the first car arrived. Erving Goffmann (1961) termed the phrase 'focused gathering' to depict how people encounter each other through a common activity that is governed by rules (pp. 9–10). This type of gathering can fall apart and merge again, and the activity, which ties the members together, is repeatable again and again. The Mursi–tourists encounter strongly resembles Goffmann's focused gatherings.

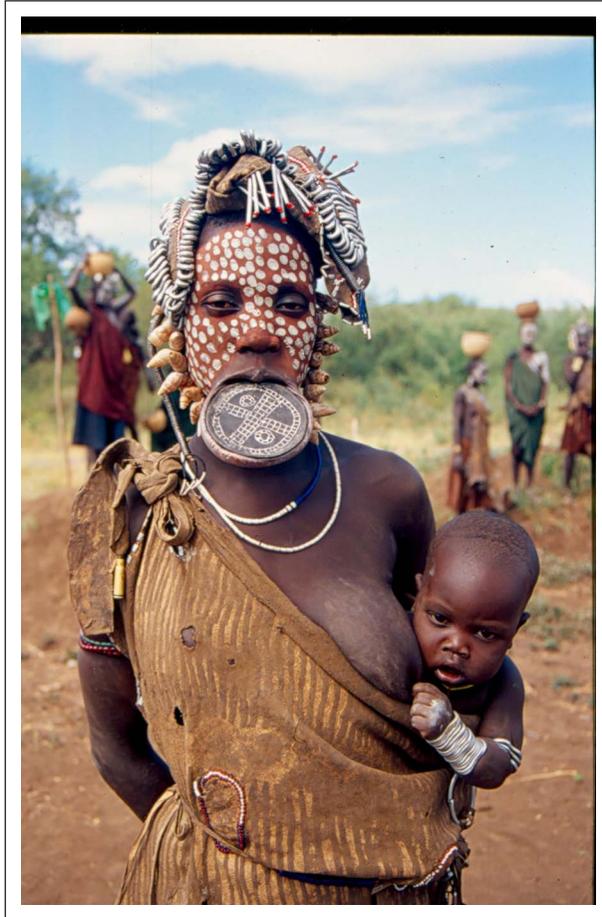


Figure 4. Mursi woman posing for a tourist's camera.

Photo: Tamás Régi.

When the first car arrived, usually at 09:00 am every day, the whole settlement was filled with anticipation and everyone tried to get ready for the event. They finalised their paintings, put more ash on their face and hung materials on their bodies. I distinguish three tactics utilised by the Mursi when approaching tourists at the beginning of the encounter. First, people ran towards the car(s) and swamped them from the very first moment, hardly allowing the passengers to get out of the vehicles. If there were more cars, this practice was less intense. Mostly, women and children, but younger boys also, crowded the vehicles, surrounding them, and when people got out, they immediately started to ask them to take their photograph. In this case, the physical contact was unavoidable for tourists. The Mursi pulled slightly at the tourists' shoulders, hit their hands, dragged at their wrists and tried to attract their attention as quickly as possible.

Talking in slightly raised voices, the Mursi asked their visitors to follow them and take their picture. '*Bhoto, bhoto!*'; '*hey, na, na!*'; '*anyi, anyi!*'; '*djala, djala (Amharic)!*'¹¹

were the main injunctions. They tried to separate certain tourists from the crowd, bringing them to a clearer spot where they could be photographed more easily, where they could control and direct the communication with them. Meanwhile, they lightly hit their own chests and stood-to, posing and showing the tourists that they were ready to be photographed. Lacking common language, the 'play' of these local actors facilitated the communication and ritualised the message.

The second mode of approaching tourists was different. When the cars arrived, they always parked under the biggest tree, in a clean open spot at one end of the settlement. The Mursi did not run to the cars but assembled in different groups and waited for the tourists to get out of their cars. Women and men stayed separately. When the tourists got out of the car, the Mursi approached them together, and no individual separated from the group at this stage. A larger female group (or groups) lined up, facing towards the tourists. The tourists also lined up opposite to the Mursi row (see this situation in Figure 5). Then the two parties briefly investigated each other visually. Tourists got their photographic equipment ready while the Mursi watched them. Then, usually with the help of their guide, one of the scouts, or one of the local Mursi males, tourists chose those Mursi persons whom they wanted to photograph. The chosen Mursi people walked away with the tourist and another stage began in their relations: the negotiation and the photographing.

The third method of raising the attention of tourists was where married women or older widows sat in front of a hut and cried out, inviting nearby tourists to take their picture. Modes of gaining attention were varied. People tried to communicate with tourists by hand clapping, screaming or whistling, and when tourists looked towards them, they slapped their chests and asked them to take their photograph. Besides the average 'make up' for outsiders, most Mursi women worked, or imitated working activities, for

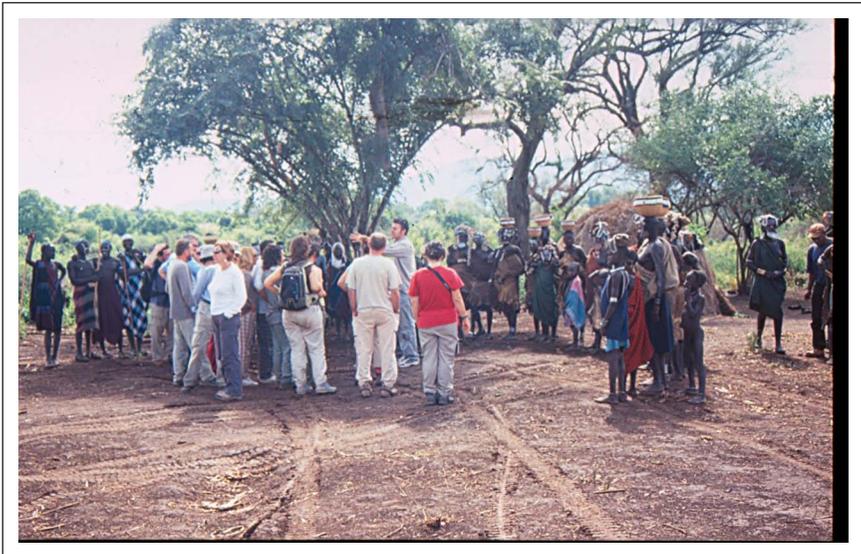


Figure 5. Mursi line up for tourists.

Photo: Tamás Régi.

the tourists, typically grinding sorghum, cleaning grain, scratching animal skin, making lip-plates or roasting maize.¹² At the end of the encounter, the Mursi women usually finished these 'cover activities', or even abandoned the 'job' when the tourists left the close vicinity of their hut, for it was carried out primarily to attract tourists. The most popular 'job' was grinding, and tourists were invited to kneel down and try to grind with the grinding stones.

Middle-aged men, or elders, rarely went after tourists, although occasionally they touched the shoulder of a tourist with their stick and asked them to take their picture. If tourists went to ask them whether they could take a picture, they never refused, but they sat quietly in a separate place and rarely mingled with the main group. All modes of approach ended in a situation where a group of Mursi (varying between 2 and 10 persons) and either a single tourist or a group of tourists started to interact and communicate with each other, and the key aim of all approaches was to sort out the price tourists would pay for the images.

Cultural brokers in Solbu

Before I describe the key practice of photography in the encounters, it is necessary to talk about the vital role of the translators, mediators or cultural brokers who help communication between the Mursi and their visitors. I have already mentioned *Balsham*, who actively participated in *Solbu's* social life, especially in decision-making. Together with his friend *Olekorro*, they frequently participated in almost every phase of the encounter. First, from the drivers or tour guides, they collected the 200 Ethiopian Birr (ETB) per car, an unwritten but widely known general price that had to be paid by every car that entered any Mursi settlement.

Olekorro and *Balsham* were the first Mursi who went to the cars of those entering *Solbu*. They usually knew the drivers and tour guides, whom they would affably greet and exchange news. *Olekorro*, occasionally with the aid of other, older Mursi men, would then try to manage the encounters. With a piece of wand, they would gently whisk those Mursi people who were too 'forceful' with the tourists. When too many Mursi overran the tourists and loudly asked them to take a picture, *Olekorro* stood next to the 'victims' and with mock anger imitated how he would hit his Mursi fellows if they did not immediately move away.

Other actors adopted a similar role. Every car that entered Mursiland had to pick up an armed scout at the Mago National Park checkpoint, who also helped to manage the encounters due to their good relations with the Mursi. Other mediators in this complex cultural discourse were Ethiopian or foreign tour guides. They did not have as good relations with the Mursi as the aforementioned 'brokers', but they tried to 'work' in the field for their customers. Lacking almost any language and cultural knowledge about the Mursi, these outsiders hardly mediated between the two groups. They repeated the same stories about the Mursi that they picked up from guide books. Nevertheless, tourists turned to them with more confidence than to the National Park scouts or to the Mursi 'helpers'. Meanwhile, the Mursi trusted more in the scouts and in their own fellows. These contradictory and opposite communication channels often caused misunderstandings between the two groups in the encounters. Overall, the cultural brokers' main task was the same: to make the act of photography as smooth as possible.

Tactics to be framed

The local people in *Solbu* were not interested in tourists without cameras. The price of a single photo was 2 ETB per person, but tourists with bigger cameras could be charged double. If there were four Mursi in one picture, it meant that every person should earn 2 ETB, but a woman with a baby got 3 ETB because babies were worth an extra Birr. Similarly, a child with a dog earned 3 ETB because of the dog. Taking a picture of a hut was 10 ETB for the owner; going into a hut and taking a picture inside was also 10 ETB. A person with a larger camera (with a bigger lens) attracted more attention than someone with a small compact camera, since such tourists were charged more. The price of using a video camera was more uncertain. Visitors often freely roamed around holding a video camera and watching the LCD viewer, for which Mursi sometimes asked for payment of hundreds of ETB. Some Mursi were skilled in counting the shutter releases of photo cameras, and they always made tourists pay if they tried to cheat in their payments. Consequently, the main topic of communication between the tourists and the Mursi was about the photograph: what the tourist could take and at what cost.

When tourists chose one or more local people to photograph, they walked away from the crowd. However, other Mursi, who also wanted to be in the picture tried to attach themselves to those who were chosen in order to get payment. The tourists and cultural brokers tried to keep these superfluous people away from the 'photo frame'. Nevertheless, some 'extra' Mursi people usually managed to appear in the cameras' viewfinders. The tactics to seek inclusion in the frame were various and creative. Sometimes, at the very last moment, people jumped in front of the camera, or would not let the tourists leave before they took their picture. Occasionally, they clung to each others' arms, and the cultural brokers could not prise them apart. They surrounded the tourists, and it was often difficult to judge who was inside and outside the picture frame. In the debate after the photo was taken, tourists repeatedly tried to demonstrate, with the aid of their digital camera screen, which people were included in the frame. Whatever was the case, Mursi frequently claimed payment from the tourists who usually insisted that they did not intend to take the additional persons and would not pay any extra money. This tactic is characterised by individual human bodies operating within a larger social body to mobilise more power in their engagements with tourists. This 'strength in unity' spawned by the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990) and an 'economy of appearances' (Tsing, 2005) were embedded in a unique cooperation.

Although tourists were annoyed by their 'aggressive' or 'too touchy' manner, and especially by a 'too commercial' attitude, a Mursi woman explained that 'someone who is just quiet cannot get anything. We try to get money'.

Silence was unproductive in the encounter, with high voice and physical contact productive tactics for most Mursi women. This resonates with other cases in which locals make visitors feel uncomfortable. As Erik Cohen (1971) notes, Arab boys annoy tourist girls, and often the police have to interfere in the relationships. Research in the Caribbean (Getfield, 2005; Mullings, 1999) also reports examples in which locals struggle to accept the economic differences between them and their visitors. Most Mursi refused to accept the idea that tourists could not pay as much money as the Mursi demanded, and they perceived the radically commercial relationship with them as completely viable. The

culture of Mursi performances for tourists' cameras was formed out of a friction between cultures that emerged out of different concepts of exchange.

What followed after the photo was taken was also intriguing: the Mursi did not accept the money they had previously agreed upon with the tourists but frequently requested more money after each photographic action, with any concept of economic contract seemingly non-existent. The resultant scene was usually that of angry, shouting, watery-eyed tourists following the Mursi and waving notes, asking them to take the money. However, the Mursi usually refused the sum, turning away from the furious tourists, or refused to touch the proffered money. Tourists repeatedly, after a short hesitation, would put the money on the ground and leave. This was the peak of the theatrical play, the tourists' unease and frustration contrasting with Mursi angry discontent. Tourists were completely puzzled and asked their drivers or guides about the reason for this behaviour. Subsequently, with the help of one of the cultural brokers, the negotiation continued until the tourists paid the required sum. If the trick did not work and the tourists were grumpy enough not to pay more than they agreed, the original price was accepted by the Mursi. There were cases when the economic transaction went smoothly, but a short debate was almost always in prospect. Some tourists became fed up very quickly because of this situation, and they asked their guide to leave *Solbu*, or they sat back in the car, or walked around without taking any pictures.

Because of this 'too commercial' conduct, tourists were afraid of missing out on an 'authentic' experience that only a 'real Mursi village' could provide, without all of these commercial circumstances. They questioned whether they were in a 'real' Mursi village or in a 'tourist village'. Their suspicions were manifest in how they continuously searched for ruptures in the 'setting' of the settlement, questioning and challenging every 'incongruous' detail. Certainly, I, as the sole White man in the settlement, appeared as an inappropriate detail. Tourists often came to me to clarify my position towards the Mursi, expressing relief when they learned that I was an anthropologist, perhaps because this fitted with their understanding of the place. Moreover, the presence of other tourists was annoying for certain tourists, with occasionally more than 10 4WDs arriving at *Solbu* and with the small settlement suddenly becoming extremely crowded. Tourists became furious with their drivers and guides and asked them to go to a place where there were no other White people.

The arguments between the two sides of the encounter implicitly illustrate their desire to participate in the encounter in very different ways. The only shared realm between them was the fiction of the photographic frame when engaged with the other, but both of them conceived it in different ways. For the tourists, the Mursi needed to be framed. For them, the Mursi people were the highlight of the tourist experience, and the pictures from Mursiland were among the most important trophies of their trip. They did not want to distinguish this tourist site as distinctive from Mursi everyday life.

Mimic as tactic to avoid danger

Besides the desire to be photographed, there was a contradictory Mursi emotion associated with photography: fear. Most Mursi were unafraid, but many members of the older generation¹³ did express fear of the camera and others refused to be photographed, such

as mothers who complained if someone took a picture of their sleeping child, explaining that sleeping people are more vulnerable than those who are awake.¹⁴ For some, the act of photography and the actual materiality of the camera posed a risk akin to an enemy's gun. For instance, when Mursi people talk about tourists, they often put their palms in front of their eye in imitation of a camera. The phrase for photography is *éjo*, which equally means taking a picture and shooting with a gun. Accordingly, the Mursi also employ the gesture of pulling a trigger – by pulling back the right index finger with the left first finger, with one eye closed – to signify the taking of photographs.

This ambiguous relationship to the tourist camera made me wonder whether the Mursi hid themselves behind masquerades because of the danger of tourist photographs? Was there a 'face' and a protective ontological politics beneath the aforementioned economic masquerade? Was *la perruque* 'a form of *practical* reflexivity in which embodied know-how modulates unforeseen events' (Edensor, 2009: 545)? The Mursi mimic, play and perform as 'wild people' when encountering tourists. On one hand, this is an economic adaptation, a commercialised form of ethnological performance, which creates solidarity within the performer group based on repetitive experience. On the other hand, it is a 'balancing mechanism' (MacCannell, 1992: 32), which is necessary to control the burlesque to not miss the mark and become a self-parody. In this sense, the described events above can be understood as a variety of ritual tactics in independent formations that maintain an exploitable image and the potential for interchangeability between different personhoods.

This is a constantly maintained image, a mimic of the 'primitive' in a setting without almost any formal mode of state or economic control. What stands out here is that in mimicking an imaginary sociality, as a tactic with different goals, the result does not necessarily resemble any original to be effective. As Michael Taussig (1991) argues, the copy should not necessarily be similar to the original in order to be successful. The cultural commodity, the atmosphere the Mursi create in the ethno-business (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009), is an imitated, temporary human condition. Tourists make a copy (take a picture) about a mimesis (mimic of the 'wild savage'), but within one performance, there are different meaningful layers.

Embodied tactics

All in all, the majority of the Mursi wanted to be in front of the camera. However, in tourist settlements such as *Solbu*, the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990) was not directed equally upon the whole Mursi society. Different Mursi generations and genders participated on a different scale and in different ways in the encounters. Tourists often sought adolescent girls who painted and adorned themselves and posed for the camera on request. Consequently, Mursi females between 13 and 19 years were the most photographed, and therefore, the most economically successful. These girls and women already had lip-plates, were usually not married and therefore lacked obligations towards husbands and children. They could move relatively freely and were strong enough to walk the great distance to *Solbu*, even on a daily basis.

The younger male generation, the *Changalay* age grade, boys between 0 and 12 years, could not participate in the encounters in large numbers as they were either too young, or

required to work with the livestock in the grassland areas. The adolescent *dhongai* boys, the older age grade, were seen more frequently in *Solbu* but were neither attractive to tourists (therefore they could not earn money) nor powerful enough to claim money from the common pool from the elders. They followed the girls, who were often their lovers, and tourists occasionally wanted to photograph strong, tall 'warriors' with their Kalashnikovs. However, they were usually not allowed to leave the cattle camps for long periods since their major task was to take care of the animals on a daily basis. Married women, aged between 25 and 40 years, were the second most active group in the encounters because they possessed lip-plates. These women often carried babies in their arms and were photographed together by tourists.

Accordingly, it is apparent that the tourist gaze was directed towards a narrow range of the Mursi population, young females, who lived in, or could travel to, one of the settlements near the Mago Bridge. I estimate that more than half of the photographs were taken of these girls in *Solbu* or at one of the surrounding settlements. The tourist gaze (Urry, 1990) in this sense was a socially constitutive force, 'the looking' shaping the social performance of encountering tourists.

Moreover, the tourist gaze is even more specific, concentrating not on the whole female Mursi body but merely a section of it. Normally, Mursi female dress covers the right shoulder, the hips and around the knees. The left shoulder and the breast were often naked, usually covered with scarification. In contrast to the open, decorated and emphasised upper body, the lower body parts remain private, especially in front of outsiders. While the upper body, particularly the face and head, are vehicles of communication towards the other (either Mursi or tourist), the lower part of the body is never regarded as a site of cultural communication, and accordingly, most body paint is applied on these exposed parts.

Older women often complained jokingly that they are not interesting for tourists, since their bodies are old and their lips are already drawn back.¹⁵ Elders in *Mako* discuss extensively how wrong it is that they are no longer attractive enough for the tourists. All of the women who attracted the tourist sight were of reproductive age, just before or after marriage and child-rearing. According to the general Mursi division of labour, women's tasks are grinding, collecting firewood, cooking, looking after children, or making pottery. Men and women work together in the sorghum fields or build houses together. Dealing with by-passers has also become primarily a female activity. Investing in organising tactical responses to the tourist gaze, the Mursi provide a platform for a traditionally feeble social group, unmarried women. Consequently, the techniques utilised to disguise and mask economic reproduction have become the art of the politically weakest.

Conclusion

This article has argued that we should pay more attention to the complexity of local performances in tourist settings. The different acts that local people present for their visitors are not homogeneous performances but carry complex cultural meanings. These multi-layered implications are particularly evident in small-scale societies without an established locus of control, such as the state's formal political and economic power, no

history of developed tourism and the lack of a functioning civil society. I have demonstrated this argument through a description and analysis of *Solbu*, a Mursi model settlement. This living space is a material secret for most tourists who are ambiguous about its 'authenticity', history and origin.

The Mursi metaphorically encompassed their visitors in *Solbu*, and tried to persuade them that their performance is part of their everyday life. In order to elucidate better the relationship between these performances and their various underlying meanings, I used the concept of *la perruque* as an umbrella term for the collective, symbolic meanings evinced in masquerade, trickery or 'face' protection' that the Mursi skilfully applied in these performances. The Mursi used diverse tactics to enchant the tourists, altering their skin and faces. These efforts are geared to ensure that the Mursi are photographed, an economy of performances embedded in cooperation, but these masquerades and paintings are also devised to protect the personhood of the actors. I have argued that here the socially and politically weak mobilise the mysterious power that Western tourists attribute to them, both in terms of a marginal society within the state and with regard to the performance being enacted by unmarried women, the weakest section of Mursi society.

Within the Mursi performances, there is a balancing mechanism that is necessary to control the burlesque, protect the self and make the act economically profitable. In this sense, these acts can be understood as ritual tactics that maintain an economically useful face and uphold the possibilities of the interchangeability between different personhoods. Here, the modalities of action aim to maintain the value of the performance by inventing a tradition (Hobsbawn, [1983] 2012) through mimesis and repetition, but for how long these tactics will remain effective in 'boundary maintenance' (Barth, 1998) is open to question. For as more Mursi are increasingly exposed to global connections, their cultural performances gradually stretch the boundaries of identity, producing frictions that might result in cultural schizophrenia. If this eventuates, the wig on the head will miss the mark, the mimicked and the mimicker will blur into one and such cultural tactics will not be able to manipulate the 'Other'.

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Notes

1. It is difficult to define Western as a homogeneous concept. In the discussed research area, the majority of the tourists were about 85% Spanish. Others were Italian, French, Dutch, German, British, American, Japanese, Canadian, Israeli, Hungarian, and Polish. Only very few Ethiopian and African tourists visited the site during my field research.
2. About Mursi lip-plates, see LaTosky (2006) and Fayers-Kerr (2012).
3. The data collected in the field contradict 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. Timeless Ethiopia Tour Company, Green Land Tours, Getts and Ethiopian Rift Valley Safari.
5. *Warkata* was originally an Amharic word for writing. The Mursi probably borrowed it from the Amharic.
6. All personal names are pseudo-names in the text.
7. Cattle brands often served as ownership marks and not only artistic values.
8. I have a limited knowledge on the ancient origin of these types of body paints. It is possible that one of the goals of these white paintings can be to keep insects away from the skin or protect against the strong sun, or it might be a part of an old hunter custom, which tries to eliminate the human body smell during the hunting.
9. Mursi women wear lip-plate only regularly after marriage. As a result, their lower lip draws back to almost its original size.
10. A piece of stuffed calf skin that was used for cow milking.
11. Photo, photo, hey listen, me, me, mate, mate!
12. About the Mursi imitation of work and labour for tourists, please see Régi (2012) for more details.
13. Similar experiences have been related (e.g. Cohen et al., 1992) from many parts of the world where locals have not been accustomed to the camera.
14. I had the allusion that this fear was much stronger if the photographer was a White man, but I was never able to check this hypothesis.
15. The lower lip draws back almost to its original size if the owner does not continuously use her lip-plate.

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