

Who are the Mursi?

David Turton
and Lugulointheno Jordomo

The story begins with a journey, a journey of around 30 km. as the crow flies, which took place around two hundred years ago. Those who made it were not Mursi. They were living at the time in the Dirka hills (Fig. 1) in what is now the Omo National Park, along with the ancestors of today's Chai. Probably because they were experiencing a period of drought, or conflict with their neighbours, or both, they decided to leave Dirka, in search of a new home, east of the Omo (*Warr*). Although they had only a short distance to travel, the journey was not without risks. They had to take their cattle across the biggest river any of them had seen and then face an uncertain reception from the people whom they knew lived on the other bank. These included the Kwegu, a group of hunters who see themselves and are seen by others as the original inhabitants of the Omo, and the Bodi (Me'en) who are now the northern neighbours of the Mursi. But the move was successful. Having crossed the river at a place called Dorl (Fig. 1) and established a foothold in the south of present-day Mursiland, they slowly made the land their own, parcelling out stretches of the river bank amongst themselves. Some of the people already living there were intimidated into leaving, while others were incorporated into what eventually became a new ethnic group, with the self-name, Mun. The group is now known by a variety of names to others – Taama to the Bodi, Ngi-kaalabong to the Nyangatom, Murso to the Kara, Mun to the Chai, Muruz to the Daasanach and Mursi to highland agriculturalists, the government and the world at large.

A short journey then, probably made initially by a relatively small group of people, but one with big consequences, amounting to nothing less than the 'making' of the Mursi. Not surprisingly, it has become the subject of one of the best known and most frequently told stories in Mursi oral tradition. Below is a version of the story told by the late Lugulointheno Jordomo in 1996. A member of the Bumai clan, he was then aged about 50 and was one of the most politically active and historically knowledgeable men of the recently created Geleba age set. We take up the story after Lugulointheno had explained that, at the time in question, the ancestors of the Mursi were living at Dirka and watering their herds at a hot spring, called Shaura, in the nearby grass plain (Fig 1). It happened that two particular bulls started to go missing, every day, when the rest of the cattle were taken to drink at Shaura, only to reappear later in the day. One of these bulls was owned by a man called Tongokuri, of the Juhai clan, which happened to be the clan of Lugulointheno's mother. The other was owned by a man called Bule, of the Komorte clan, a clan from which the main politico-ritual leaders, or priests, of the Mursi are drawn. From this opening mystery – where were the bulls going to drink? - the narrative leads us to a resolution in which the ancestors of today's Mursi 'find' the Omo River, cross it by magical means and take possession not only of their present territory but also of their Mursi identity.

Lusi a Tongokuri seathe shune ke 'Harle beg uli!'
Tongokuri told his son, 'Watch that bull!'

Ina komoruin seathe shune ke, 'Harle beg uli!'
The Priest told his son, 'Watch that bull!'

'Na huli uli genee na bio wheni, bhwe dhoi uliyoye – koba ne bhwe mate arra!'
'When the bull is grazing, and the cattle come [to drink], watch where it goes - follow it and find out where it drinks'

Beku dirr na huli bio dongchinyana nga, uli choi dorogi, hash!
[Tongokuri's son] watched the bull carefully and, when the cattle came to drink, it crashed off into the bush, *hash!*

Kobu dirr – ina Tongokuri. Bunathe zuo. Irru mai-ni.
He followed it and followed it and followed it until it reached a place [on the Omo] where there were people. That's where it drank.

Arte ko zuo nga tana – Nydi. Nyidi el nga tana.
And he saw people on this side [the east bank] – Kwegu. There were Kwegu on this side.

'Kuduma hiri nano, eee!'
'I've found [someone to be] my man!' [said Tongokuri's son].

'Kuduma inye so!'
'I've found *you!*' [replied a Kwegu].

'Na nga bi-a?'
'So what about this bull?' [asked Tongokuri's son].

'A bi kaje anyoi ma nga chir'.
'It's my bull - I always bring it here to drink' [said the Kwegu].

Uli a komoruin koiye – koi ko lusi bunthathen Warro nganga.
The same thing happened with the Priest's bull – it also went as far as the Omo, followed by the Priest's son.

Daino togoin lorna ma gussioni.
In the evening the boys drove the bulls back, carrying water in their gourds.

'Wa ulinya kopto na au tordo ori?'
'Did you follow the bulls?' asked the people. 'Did you see where they went?'

'Ulinya wa aita na aita mai pu rammai, el tui nga'.
'They kept on going until they got to a really long river, over there' said the boys.

'Ma a meri?'
'Was there a lot of water?'

'He! A meri so. Mai pu rammai huli kogwin nga, hey nganga teee hung – ba nga dhoneo.'
'A lot of water? It's such a long river you can't see where it ends.'

Daino zuo mezedoni. Mezeeee...na sene ke 'Harle belle kete zigini'.

So in the evening the people debated. They debated and debated and debated until eventually they decided to move. 'Lets leave at dawn' they said.

Belle zuo ziwone hung-ni, buuu.

In the morning they all set off together.

Na when na Dorlo tano elane bai, na chibe mora, mora,mora.

And when they got to Dorl, on the west bank of the Omo, they stopped and tethered all the calves.

Bio el whuin. Zuo el whuin.

The cattle didn't drink [from the Omo]. The people didn't drink [from the Omo].

Bage debi.

The people smeared clay on their bodies.

Na kiwana hiri. Kaje berr – berr-a ma.

They chose a man and gave him a spear – a man's spear.

Kabathen debi a korra na kubuti hugio.

He smeared black clay on his body and red clay on the blade of the spear.

Eden kiangi wush – dhobwe berr – orr berr.

He raised his arm and aimed the spear four times.

Berr koi na kon kio tano – dhobwano tano na kon kio nga tana, tomotheyo.

He threw the spear and it hit a *tomothey* tree on the other bank.

Hir-aga dug ma.

Then he walked into the river.

Huli dug ma nga, bodine ke kio hula nga kita nga.

When he got into the river, he turned into a tree – just like this one here.

Ngani zuo dhone gora wa dhone hirio hung.

Then the people followed him into the river.

Ma kenchabwe na te hula nga ba nga.

And when they got into the river, the waters parted and it became dry land, like it is here.

Ma kedhu hung-ni - nga gia nga au nga, gia au nga.

The waters just parted – some went in one direction and some went in the other.

A logo hang – Mun a berari so!

That's what really happened - the Mursi are powerful!

The handing on of historical information in a primarily oral culture, especially information about the origin of a group, differs greatly from the factual history which is sought after by literate historians. One way in which this difference shows itself is in the frequent occurrence of highly standardised and formulaic episodes in the oral traditions of different and sometimes widely separated groups. These episodes, called 'clichés' by students of oral tradition, enable complex information and ideas to be

‘packaged’ into a form that is simple to express and easy to remember. By definition, therefore, they are unlikely to be a reliable guide to the details of what actually happened in any one case. The people described in the above story, for example, are said to have discovered the Omo because they were led to it by two of their own stock animals. This cannot be empirically true, since the Omo is clearly visible from the Dirka hills, where they were living at the time, and only 20 km east of Shaura, where they were watering their herds. The Omo, therefore, must have already been part of their known world, which is the very reason they could contemplate making the decision to move there. What then, if anything, does the story of the two bulls tell us about the historical reality it purports to describe?

The Mursi see themselves as a people who are, and always have been, ‘looking for a cool place’ (*kalamo bha lalini*). For pastoralists, this must imply, first and foremost, a place that satisfies the needs of cattle for water and grazing. The story of the bulls going off to drink at the Omo (which is found also, incidentally, in the origin tradition of the nearby Kara) may therefore be telling us that it was the needs of their cattle for water and grazing that led the first Mursi to colonise the east bank of the Omo. Indeed it is likely that the journey described above was prompted by a prolonged period of drought in the Omo lowlands, which would have made the relatively well-watered plains east of the Omo seem like an attractive prospect to a cattle-herding people. For here was a ‘cool place’ that combined a perennial source of water with well drained savanna grassland, rising gradually to the Omo-Mago watershed. Similar ecological imperatives have no doubt driven the migratory movements of pastoralists in East Africa for hundreds, indeed thousands, of years, which would explain why other traditions of origin in the region employ the same cliché.

But a tradition of origin is more than just a story about the past. Its purpose is not so much to explain how a group came to be, as to show that it was *meant* to be. The story must therefore invest with historical inevitability a purely contingent series of events which could have had an entirely different outcome. To do this it must show that the group owed its existence to agents and events which were beyond the reach of everyday human understanding - that were, to use a Mursi word, *berari*. One way in which this is achieved in the above story is by attributing the discovery of what was to become Mursiland to the actions of two non-human agents. Another is through the use of one of the most widespread clichés to be found in African traditions of origin – the magical crossing of a river. The crossing of the Omo is presented here as an inherently dangerous undertaking, requiring various preparatory measures of ritual protection, and accomplished by means of a miraculous parting of the waters which showed, in Luguloitheno’s words, that ‘the Mursi are powerful!’ (*Mun a berari*). To find their ‘promised land’, then, the Mursi had depended on the inscrutable behaviour of the two bulls and on their own supernatural power.

By the middle of the last century they were successfully cultivating along the Omo as far north as Kuduma, and herding their cattle in the wooded grass plains to the east. In the early 1970s, however, they experienced a drought and food shortage so severe that people died of starvation for the first time in living memory. The last three years of the same decade was also a period of poor rainfall and continuing hunger. This prompted a small group of families (probably no more than fifty) to move further east, to higher ground which had last been occupied about, seventy years earlier, by the Bodi. This was another short journey, of around 25 km as the crow flies, which

took the migrants to the banks of another perennial river, the Mago (*Mako*). This area promised better rainfall, improved conditions for cultivation and better access to highland markets. Its disadvantages included the possibility of conflict with the neighbouring highland agriculturalists, the Aari, and a relatively high level of tsetse infestation in the Mago Valley, which brought with it an increased threat to cattle from trypanosomiasis.

But over the following twenty years the original migrants were joined by a steady drift of new arrivals, and the 'People of Mako' (*zu a Makwe*) now form one of the largest constituent local divisions (*bhuranyoga*) of the Mursi. Having opted for a more sedentary lifestyle within the orbit of the highland market economy, they are seen by many Mursi today as on the way to becoming highland agriculturalists (*sunya*). But, so far from seeing themselves as falling away from traditional Mursi values, those who initiated the move saw themselves as 'more Mursi' than those who had stayed behind, since they were acting in the pioneering spirit of the 'founding fathers' who had first colonised the east bank of the Omo.

It is safe to assume that the Mago migration bore many of the hallmarks of the journey described above by Luguloitheno. With the help of this extrapolation we can imagine a general process in which small groups of pioneers, driven largely by environmental pressure, broke away from their parent groups and moved relatively short distances to occupy new territory. When a move was successful (and, of course, we only know of the successes), the pioneers were joined by a gradual drift of new migrants and eventually a new group was made, with its own identity, livelihood system and even language. And so the process continued. The result was a chain of groups, stretching over a long distance in space and time, in which the group at the end of the chain, at any one time, saw itself as having made a single epic migration and therefore as sharing a residual identity with all the other groups in the chain. In this sense, the journey that made the People of Mako began long before the journey that made the Mursi.