

Reveal and remove Uses of the body and its ornaments in Mursiland

Jean-Baptiste Eczet

The Omo Valley has become in recent years a prime photographic resource for reporters looking for rich body ornamentation. They often present this ornamentation as the simple, natural art of a people described as witnesses of the « dawn of humanity » (Silvester 2006, 2008; Szvardon 2006; Fisher & Beckwit 1990 and, for a critic, see Regi 2013). A few academic publications are attempting to challenge these stereotypes (Girke 2014). But, with a few exceptions, the importance of the aesthetic practices in use among the pastoral Nilotic societies of East Africa has been largely underestimated. The existing literature on body ornamentation among the Mursi focuses on the lip-plates (Turton 2004; Latosky 2006; Eczet 2012), which are certainly a famous emblem of the Mursi and their neighbours, the Suri. Kate Fayers-Kerr (2013) has also made an important contribution to Mursi studies, focusing on health and healing. In her study, she examines the actual processes of body painting with clay to show how substances are used and conceived in Mursi relationships with territory, rather than focusing on the social effect achieved by the paintings. James Faris' book on the Nuba (1972) is the only work focusing on the ornamentation *per se*, though the author restricts himself to a formal and symbolical mode of analysis.

The present article aims to shed light on some of these practices among the Mursi, a pastoral people of several thousand living in the Omo valley in southern Ethiopia. Indeed, in contrast to their reduced material culture (see Serge Tornay 1975 on the Nyangatom and Jon Abbink 2000 on the Me'en or Bodi, both neighbours of the Mursi), they make extensive daily use of body ornamentation. In this article I will show how aesthetic processes involved in ornamentation play an essential role in the Mursi's most basic interactions.

* Fondation Fyssen / PPGAS-Museu nacional, Rio de Janeiro (Brasil).

Though Mursi body ornamentation is omnipresent in daily life, it never seems to play a central role. Moreover, the Mursi themselves have little to say about it, if at all. Most of the time they justify the use of ornamentation by the simple exclamation: it's good ! (A *challi!*). Almost no further explanation is offered. And although I was quite insistent trying different ways to catch a comment from the Mursi, I always got the same rethorical, authoritative statement: « That's our tradition » (A *dame a gugnu*). Thus, the role and social impact of Mursi ornamentation have to be understood by the practices observed, and not by formal interviews.

After showing that there is no overall adornment but a multiplicity of specific ones, I present some of them, focusing on the more ephemeral ones (see Eczet 2012a and 2012b for a study of some of the permanent ones). Each type of adornment is associated with a different thematic area. Thus, ornaments are used to manage interactions between the bearer of the adornment and various kind of beings (the peers, the cattle, the dead, and the tourists), either by revealing these beings or by distancing them. In Mursiland, to paint one's body and to use adornments is not merely a matter of aesthetic expressivity but a constant re-creation of visual propositions that contribute to interactions. In this sense, they *are* the interactions themselves.

Jewellery : revealing one's relational network

Jewellery reveals a part of the relational network of those who wear it. Though they all have an owner, jewels are borrowed and exchanged through interpersonal relationships. This explains for instance why young women have more or less the same number of bracelets despite differences of wealth. In fact, just as important as the wearing of jewel is to stop wearing it and to replace it by another one. Jewels are not worn exclusively by virtue of ownership, but in a kind of usufruct made possible by virtue of relational ability. And because jewellery is preferentially used only at a certain age, the exchange reveals a relational network specifically among peers.

Painting with dung: showing one's pastoral qualities

The painting of human and male cattle bodies with dung expresses two goals: for the bull, to enhance his reproductive capacity; for the man painted, his search for a woman. Indeed, the comment of the young men is very explicit : « I want to get married » (*kihine gama*). But the thematic parallel between animal reproduction and human courtship is more than merely an analogy. Instead the painting it is a way to show the interdependence and mutual help between human and cattle, enabling both to present themselves in a better way.

The man shows his pastoral domestic capacities. The dung for the painting is always taken into the enclosure, and ash is added. This last come from dried dung of the previous day which has been burned during the night to provide heat for the cattle. This dung is thus associated with domestic activities. To portray this male domestic activity acts as a proof of the intense labour that is the only way to get married. Indeed, a Mursi man must give 38 heads of cattle to his bride's father. I therefore argue that visual experience is a common aspect of mursi social life, dealing both with singular identity and various types of relationship. With a dung painting, the intention of the owner is visible on the bull's body, while the bull's product is visible on the owner's body, allowing for both a good expression of the pastoral project.

Painting with clay: problems of vision

Clay is used for face painting in various events and are mainly related with troubles. I argue that the common point of the troubles treated with clay is a problem of vision. Here, I propose an interpretation of clay painting that focuses on dreams and visions of death. I will first recall some aspects of Mursi culture that use visual properties: naming system and poetry. For instance, a Mursi man may have several names, such as Olebiseni (Spotted Bull), Bologushiro (Hyena's Spots), and Charengale (Leopard Wide Horns). These different names are used by different people, each alluding to a special relationship with the person named. All of a person's names refer to the same particular cattle coat colour or pattern, in this case black spotted. Thus, a baby girl may be named Tumu Dayno (Evening Sky), with the result that any other names she is given later in life will repeat the "black spotted" theme. Poetry is omnipresent in the social life of the Mursi; it always deals with relationships with others, and/or with elements of the environment that share a common color dimension. When poems are recited, people produce a discourse about themselves, for example, after rituals: each poem presents number of visual, coloured references that describe the singer of the poems.

Visual propositions form a constant background to the Mursi's daily life, existing in the form of discourse such as names and poems, or tangibly in the ornamented, painted bodies. Consequently, « mistaken » visual phenomena can be a source of fear that needs social treatment.

The problem that comes up with vision of dead people is to see them as if the visual perception was real. It is not a matter of meaning, sorcery or memory but the mere visual-experience of seeing someone dead when one cannot literally see him. Moreover, in Mursiland, one may not speak of dead people, just as one may never tell his dream in public. Thus, dreaming of dead people is common but is an experience that can only be shared indirectly by undefined traces, like traces of clay on a face. Some

specialists of vision called *ngereye* assist people in their management of dreams and fear of visions by providing clay and instructions in how to use it. The competences of such specialists consists in their being able to see where others cannot: far places, past, future, or death. By putting clay on his face, the dreamer re-creates the relation with the dead; he informs others about his ambiguous, probably bad mood, without telling his experience. Thus, the dead is absorbed into interactions of the living and is no more passively imposed by a dream.

Dances: blurring the body

Dances are an expression of Mursi vitality. As a collective event which all people participate in, dancing allows a concentrated form of the differentiated actions, intentions and positions which are dispersed throughout the pastoral, semi-nomadic everyday life. It engages the whole community in a global choreography composed of three successive acts: 1) the call of the young women to the men, 2) the proposal made by the men to these young women, 3) the women's response to this proposal. The young men and women are the players in this expression of vitality.

During the second act, the men -who are painted- respond with a specific choreography to the women -who are not. The men body painting is asymmetric and with many visual attractions, in order to blur the visual perception of the body. After the interaction with the women and some minutes of very intense dancing, the men sweat so much so that the painting disappears. The body is now fully visible to the audience. The painting thus creates first an obstruction for the gaze and then reveals the body when it is washed away in sweat.

Painting for tourists: disguise and paradox

Body painting and ornaments for tourists are quite unusual.: ornamentation is much richer and the jewellery is used in an unusual manner. Drawing on Susan Sontag's discussion of the predatory nature of the photographic act (1973), I argue that this kind of ornamentation can be understood as a reaction to the strange interaction that the tourists themselves propose, notably because of their use of the camera. Indeed, the normal course of face-to-face interactions as the minimal negotiation between people is modified by the camera « mask » that the tourist places in front of his/her face. As a reaction, the Mursi use painting as a mask too: it shows itself but hides the bearer. Thus, the more the Mursi use painting, and the richer the ornamentation is, the more it paradoxically reveals the Mursi's ambivalence about their relationship with tourist. It can be understood as a way to hide themselves through misrepresentation and disguise. Another practice is the misuse of an object like the *ngilla* (a

leather decoration with two warthog horns worn by cattle on their head) which is frequently put on people's heads, or the *sira*, a woman's loincloth that is now worn on the head too.

So, one can see the increase in ornamentation as a reaction to the increasing numbers of tourists, allowing one to say that the more they are scrutinised, the more the Mursi hide themselves behind the production of a new ornamentation. The tourists get what they are looking for and the Mursi preserve their images of themselves.

Conclusion

By focusing on body ornaments, which initially might seem to be only a background to daily interactions, I show that aesthetics is not a separate area of social life, governed by its own rules or by symbolic expression: aesthetics activities *are* the interactions themselves.