

THE CONCEPT OF THE PRIMITIVE IN TEXTS AND IMAGES

From Colonial Travelogues to Tourist Blogs in Southwestern Ethiopia

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Abstract

The question of the cultural Other has always been central in the anthropology of tourism. The predominant way in which the Other appears in writings about Africa is as a manifestation of primitiveness. But the concept of the primitive tends to be treated in this literature in general terms, rather than analyzed through specific case studies. This article presents an image-dependent historiographical case study of the concept of the primitive through an analysis of colonial travelogues, hunting stories, guide and coffee table books and tourist blogs relating to the lower Omo Valley of southwestern Ethiopia. The article investigates how the trope of the primitive has been used as a politically and culturally powerful ideology and argues that a visual-historical methodology is an effective tool to explicate the social history of the primitive, an idea that draws many Western tourists to visit remote corners of Africa and seek out exotic tribes. The article is based on an extended period of anthropological field research and an extensive analysis of secondary sources.

Keywords: Africa, anthropology, Ethiopia tourism, history, primitive men, travelogue, visual representation

In 2008 and 2009 I conducted anthropological fieldwork¹ among the Mursi people² in southern Ethiopia. This involved investigating local people's perceptions of international tourists. I spent most of my time in Solbu, a small Mursi settlement that Western tourists visited every day in order to meet

the semi-nomadic Mursi. The tourists' romantic hopes for this encounter were quickly dashed by the harsh reality of their short, tense encounters, which were devoid of the social and behavioral norms the visitors expected (Turton 2004). The local Mursi had migrated to Solbu from their homes a long way away, and had done so with inflated expectations; primarily, they wanted to make money from posing for photographs with tourists. At the center of this commercialized ethno-business were Mursi women, whose lip-plates (Figure 1) attracted hundreds of tourists every month.

Figure 1: A teenage Mursi girl in the tourist settlement.



Photo: Tamás Régi, 2009.

In September 2008, a photographer from a prestigious press company arrived in Solbu early one afternoon when most tourists had already disappeared from the settlement. There were three white men, plus an Ari,³ an armed Mago National Park scout (due to safety rules every tourist vehicle must include an armed guard, collected from a checkpoint before entering Mursiland). Of the three white people, only one took photographs while the others helped to set up the shoot. After a short conversation with the men in the settlement, the visitors quickly started work on the pictures. First, a

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black cloth was fastened to a tree as a backdrop then some of the Mursi people were asked to stand in front of it; they were told to do different things, such as hold a Kalashnikov or put a cattle headdress or other objects on their heads. It was not such an unusual sight for me, as other tourists had also asked the Mursi to do such things. But the most interesting thing was that some of the Mursi were given an Apple® iPod for the shoot (Figure 2). Each person was paid two Ethiopian Birr per photograph. Afterward, the iPod was taken back. People got excited; they saw that money was not an issue for these strangers so everyone wanted to be photographed to earn some extra cash. The shoot lasted about two hours and there were about fifteen Mursi photographed. When I inquired about the iPod affair, the Mursi did not seem to give too much thought to it, taking it as just one of the strange things tourists asked them to do for photographs.

Figure 2: A photographer working with the Mursi in front of the black backdrop.



Photo: Tamás Régi, 2008.

This symbolically rich scene is my theoretical starting point for this article. The situation I witnessed on that day serves as an entry for the topic I dis-

cuss here: the historiography of the concept of the primitive in Africa. What I am interested in is the historiography of this imagery. According to Salazar, “It is hard to think of tourism without imaginaries or ‘fantasies’” (2012: 865). Thus, in order to understand why contemporary photographers (tourists, filmmakers, etc.) often search for what they consider to be primitive, I carry out an image-dependent historiography of the “primitive” in Africa; a historiography in which pictorial representation builds on politically powerful ideologies, from colonial travels to modern tourism. I chose this visual-historical methodology because the image this photographer created is, to use Michael Taussig’s (1987: 197) phrase,⁴ “a mnemonic of focal points in social history,” an imagery device that relentlessly maintains the culturally different and the uncanny in our unconscious, and keeps the myth of the primitive accessible all the time. Due to this, the idea of the primitive is cyclically present in the history of culture contacts between the West and Africa.

The above-described African with Western goods is a good example of a postmodern fusion of cultural contact in many people’s imagination, and international tourists are inevitably one of the major consumers of this image. Therefore, from all of the different contemporary popular narratives here I largely concentrate on tourism, although I am fully aware that tourism is only the latest social institution to incite our fascination with, and fear of, the primitive. As Western tourists chase myths (Selwyn 1996), the early form of humanity, the cannibal, the savage or the primitive, is very often part of this tourist imagination. However, the primitive is a dead cultural form (MacCannell 1992) in the sense that it is associated with a stage of humanity that has passed. This is the reason why many Western people feel nostalgic in watching them. As Rosaldo (1993) argued when he discussed imperialist nostalgia, we long for things that we have destroyed. This innocent desire is a paradox. The phenomenology of Western ethnic tourism is often built on such a paradox: societies destroy other societies and later Western tourists long to see the ruins and to recreate the lost worlds in their minds. The figure of the primitive is part of these common cultural ruins; the idea of the past cultural stage gives a basis for a common cultural heritage. However, there are different moral justifications behind this human romance.

MacCannell (1992) called contemporary groups who act as savages “ex-primitives.” These groups perform in a primitive fashion, constructing a

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reality, and what we see today is “tourist realism” (Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994) performed by ex-primitives. The Mursi, as a tourist attraction, are a primary example of such mediated imagery. In contemporary Western culture, mostly in tourism narratives, the Mursi appear as “one of the most unusual tribes of the world ... they are considered the most aggressive ethnic group,” as an anonymous writer states in a tourist blog.⁵ This type of image is responsible for a stereotype of a social group and these sorts of images are the main driver for Western visitors to Mursiland. Investigating this dialectical process, the course of the visual history of the imagined primitive, I describe how outside agents have depicted the Mursi, a group that some Western tourists visit to gain face-to-face contact with an imagined cultural Other. Through the use of different examples, I demonstrate how historical presentations of the Mursi have been cyclically picked up and reproduced in the past 150 years, alongside observations made in my contemporary fieldwork. I discuss the image that draws people to visit remote African realms and illustrate the image that contemporary African societies often copy and apply in their encounters with tourists or professional photographers. These depictions, both through the staged settings of their production and through their flow back to the Mursi in the forms of pictures and films, become formative for a specific contact culture: practices of hospitality performed only in situations of contact.

First Written Accounts of the Mursi: Body Oddities and Nudity

The plethora of dialectic and historic examinations of the representation of otherness in Western history suggests that images of black people have altered according to Western social and political interests (Coombes 1997; Fabian 2000; Kuper 2005). Such power relations are still palpable in the representations of Mursi people at the southern fringe of Ethiopia. The image of Ethiopia itself has always played an ambivalent and contradictory role in the Western Orientalist discourse. Abyssinia, as the only Christian empire in Africa, was an important aid in the long-running war against Islamic domains. Legends circulated in Europe in the 1100s about Prester John, allegedly a king of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. The land was

soon glamorized from the Orientalist viewpoint identified by Edward Said in 1979 (James 1990).

However, the lower Omo Valley in the southwestern part of the Abyssinian Empire was unknown to Europeans, even when most of the mysteries of Africa were clarified by Western travelers at the end of the nineteenth century (Imperato 1998). At this time, European explorers started to survey the terra incognita between Lake Baringo and the Abyssinian Empire, but far less international attention was paid to it than in the cases of the Nile or the Congo basins. The first European-sponsored caravan to give an account of the territory of southwestern Ethiopia was the Hungarian count Sámuel Teleki's expedition between 1887 and 1888 (Höhnel 1968). Teleki and his fellow traveler Ludvig von Höhnel were the first Westerners to give eyewitness accounts of the Nianamm (today the Omo) River and some of the people who lived along its banks. Höhnel gives a description of the people and mentions a group in the north, the Murzu, who were clearly the ancestors of the Mursi (Turton 1981). The second Western narrative about the lower Omo area, which included the Mursi themselves, was from the American hunter-traveler Arthur Donaldson Smith, who conducted two expeditions to the region in 1894 and 1899 (Smith 1897, 1900). Smith's attitude toward the locals and his mode of narration made the inhabitants of the lower Omo political objects. In his first expedition, he had only a superficial encounter with the Murle⁶ people, who lived along the river, and he stated his disgust at seeing the women's stretched lips. The textual and iconographical portrayal of the human body, or rather its oddities, is a feature of the accounts⁷ of the time and something that continues to attract visitors to the area. Smith (1897: 300) depicts a single, semi-naked, Murle woman holding a calabash on top of her head (Figure 3). The picture portrays a woman in a set-up situation, with a caption stating that "if it were not for this disfigurement, the women would probably be good-looking" (1897: 300). It is surprising that Smith did not mention lip-plates when he first visited the Mursi and gave the first Western eyewitness account of the people. Brooke first noted in 1903, when coming close to the current Suri⁸ territory, that women wore a three-inch wide plate of wood in their lower lip (Brooke 1905: 529). In 1909, Charley William Gwynn, the head of the Abyssinian-East African Boundary Commission, also described the women of the Surma, who "made them-selves indescribably hideous by distending their lower lip with a

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Figure 3: An image of a Murle woman.



Source: Smith (1897: 300).

my susceptibilities, had them clothed before bringing them to me to be questioned” (Maud 1904: 572–573). Maud’s African aid felt unease by the sight of nakedness and was afraid to embarrass his “master.”⁹ Again, nakedness defines a cultural border and demarcates a boundary between civilized and primitive terrains. The moral that these travelers (and their servants) used to judge local people was based on an extension of Euro-American bourgeois aesthetics. Interestingly, this embodied philosophical meditation later turned into a Western middle-class aesthetic enjoyment when the nudity and body torsion of the natives became a desired element of their image, as

wooden (or leather) disc, causing it to protrude from two to three inches at an angle of about 45° below the horizontal” (1911: 127).

This exaggeration of bodily difference channeled into neurotic visual discomfort and a new political and cultural rhetoric emerged where bodily oddities and the nude-clothed cultural counterpoint had negative connotations. Nudity implied natural purity in earlier Western philosophical contemplations (Ellingson 2001; Pratt 1992) on the “noble savage”; but here the naked people “formed part of the profile of primitivism and stood for lack of control” (Pieterse 1992: 79). Danger and savagery were allied with the lack of clothing among the locals, and this was present in all accounts on the area.

In 1902–1903, a member of the British survey expedition in southern Abyssinia, on his way to the lower Omo basin, commented on his meeting with the Arbore: “These were the first naked race we had met, and Mohamed Hassan, afraid of shocking

tourists, filmmakers, or photographers often asked local people to take off their clothes in front of the camera. As I observed many times during my fieldwork, bodily “oddities”—such as the famous lip-plate, skin scarification, and the half-naked local human body itself—were the focal point of the Western visitors’ gaze.

The naked body of the Other was not only strange but dangerous for the colonial travelers. Smith noted that “it was Count Teleki’s intention to explore the country north of Lake Rudolf, but he was deterred, *owing to the hostile attitude of the natives*” (1897: 297–298; emphasis added). The territory started to become terrifying under Smith’s pen. Before his group made a second attempt to explore the terra incognita of the Omo River, they were advised by the Rusia (today Dasanetch) and the Murle people not to go to the north because the hostile tribes would cut them to pieces (Ibid.: 302). They were not cut to pieces, but, according to the account, they met the miserable and warlike Kere (today the Kara) people. Smith felt threatened by his encounter with the Kere. This feeling was due to his personality; as Felix Girke argues, Smith “transformed epistemic wonder into normative judgment without even giving it a chance to work on his perception” (2006: 138). In a picture in his book, Smith is sophisticatedly portrayed as scared by the skirmishing Kere warriors (Smith 1897: 305) (Figure 4). His body is dwarfed by the fighters with whom he is trying to negotiate. He is dressed in spotless white clothes and safari hat: the image signifies the culturally superior European amid a group of wild, naked people.

Figure 4: Arthur Donaldson Smith as he encounters the Kere people.



Source: Smith (1897: 305).

The Lower Omo River as Geographical and Social Frontier

Arthur Donaldson Smith's description of the natural scene refers mostly to the water system. This is because the main geographical question of the time was whether the Nianamm was the same as the Omo River and how many rivers entered Lake Turkana (then called Lake Rudolf). This heralded the beginning of the identification of the region with the river that flows through it. From the last decade of the nineteenth century the south Omo territory was visited mostly by Abyssinian, Swahili, and Arab traders who sought new and cheap sources for elephant tusks, slaves, and gold (Barber 1968; Brooke 1905; Garretson 1986; Lamphear 1992). The area was far from the coast compared to other hunting areas and the long journey to the edge of the Abyssinian Empire supported the image of the Omo Valley in the Western imagination as inaccessible territory. From the north "according to Abyssinian ideology, the lowlands were to be avoided—they were wild and dangerous, infested with disease, and inhabited by savages who did not acknowledge God" (Donham 1986: 20). Athill (1920: 353) wrote of the Omo as a mysterious river and describes his journey from Addis Ababa to Maji as a trip from light to darkness, from civilization to barbarism. His account leads us step-by-step from a territory under political control to complete anarchy, where the lack of law and rationality make Western operations difficult.

Both the Abyssinians and the Westerners called the local population of this uncontrolled territory Shankila.¹⁰ Arnold Weinholt Hodson, a British consul for southern Ethiopia in 1914, visited the northern part of Lake Rudolf and gathered information on the lower stream of the Omo. He subdivided the Shanqalla into the Gallaba, Hamar, Kule, and Male tribes (Hodson 1927: 269). Athill (1920: 356) regards the Shankalla as a "real Negroid type, devoid of clothes," while Henry Darley, an explorer and ivory hunter who traveled along the western border of Abyssinia in the first decade of the 1900s, said that "Shankallas (Amharic for 'negro') ... are a congeries of people of mixed Hamitic and negro blood" (Darley 1935: vi). According to these accounts, the Shankila were a people without cultural characteristics inhabiting a dangerous area. Montagu Sinclair Wellby, a British military officer who conducted an extended trip between Lake Rudolf and the Nile at the end of the nineteenth century, noted that "it must be remembered that the Abyssinians, like the tribes bordering on them, have for ages lived in inter-

nal strife and conflict with outside tribes” (1900: 299). Therefore, the Abyssinian government often regarded these people as a barrier to the accomplishment of its political and economic aims, which led to the pejorative picture of the Shankila. As Darley wrote, “the Shangallas, who are the original inhabitants of the southern and western parts of the country, have been almost exterminated. These Shangallas were first conquered by Mene-lik, who destroyed about half of them during his operations” (1935: 30).

The lower Omo region at the beginning of the twentieth century appears, in Western representations, as a wild terrain inhabited by people living on the periphery of civilized society. This area was inevitably seen as a geographical frontier with sociological characteristics (Kopytoff 1987) where metropolitan centers tried to maintain a frontier-conditioned ideology in order to reach political goals. The practice of making the lower Omo Valley a cultural vacuum started with the establishment of the major economic powers in Abyssinia and British East Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century. Charles Gwynn’s border demarcation in 1909 effectively marked the end of the era of colonial competition for the Turkana Lake region (Imperato 1998). This meant that Western interest became limited to the lower Omo, as it had become part of the Ethiopian Empire.

The Eve of Systematic Studies

In the first half of the twentieth century the first tour companies started to operate in eastern Africa. More and more actors appeared on the horizon of the north Kenyan, north Ugandan, and south Sudanese buffer zone, where a couple of decades ago there were only a few white men wandering around. It was the dawning of the era of mass-produced postcards, tourist brochures, photographic books, and a growing number of ethnographic accounts, all of which established the audio-textual-visual surface of these new types of encounters. Pastoralist people in Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda became not only the subjects of systematic scientific studies but of popular imagination as well. The figure of the pastoral Other has become a type in Western intellectual culture; the diverse accounts, derived from the new Western visitors, gradually generated a persistent image of the nomadic people of East Africa. “Through their media images, pastoralists have become ‘icons’ of African traditionalism and unwitting symbols of resistance to the modernist

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values of development and conservation” (Galaty 2002: 347). Ethnic groups such as the Turkana, the Borana, the Maasai, the Samburu, the Nuer, and the Karimojong, whose livelihood and cultural values mostly relied on cattle, sheep, and goats, continued to be marginal in the political and economical sphere of their “new” countries but became central to Western popular imagination as resistant, proud, traditional, noble, primitive, and anti-modern (for more about this process, see Bruner 2002; Kasfir 2002; Kratz and Gordon 2002; Sobania 2002). Although the people of the lower Omo were not part of this myth-creating process, they later became a part of this narrative, which was shaped by the same type of Westerners who produced the image of the the Maasai, the Samburu, the Nuba, and the Nuer.¹¹

The *National Geographic*, one of the pioneers of the popular image production industry worldwide, published several articles on Ethiopia between the 1920s and 1950s (Harlan 1925; Osgood 1928; Park 1935; Roberts 1935). In their representation the Omo region, although it geographically belonged to Ethiopia, culturally it did not. The southwestern frontier of the country was not mentioned in these writings, in which central Ethiopia appeared as a consistent Christian empire where “the beginnings of Ethiopia go back to times of myth and legend” (Osgood 1928: 121). Ethiopia is a “non-Negro” empire, as Roberts stated (1935: 299), distinguishing the country from the rest of Africa and implying that the Ethiopian Empire still rather belonged to the trope of the Orient than to the cultures of “black Africa.” However, the people of the geographical and cultural fringe of this “non-Negro” empire were still almost non-existent at this time, as they were culturally and economically unimportant.

The image of cultural homogeneity of southwestern Ethiopia persisted for another two decades until the first Western scholars began their work in the region. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the first systematic studies that were generally anthropological, linguistic and historic in content, were conducted in the lower Omo region¹². The general image these works portrayed was that although the people actually lived on the political and economic fringe of a powerful domain, it did not mean that their culture was as simple as the notion of periphery would suggest. The first studies shed light on the fact that the Hamar, Dassanetch, Nyangatom, Bodi and Mursi societies were not inferior to or simpler than the Amhara, Tigre or Oromo groups. The authors of these first nuanced descriptions of the people of the lower Omo did not have a real chance to break the emerging stranglehold of the

exoticizing imagery. The majority of these field studies were carried out when the people of the lower Omo had reached their ultimate limit of territorial migration and were inevitably clashing with neighboring groups. Interethnic fights over territory were frequent in the 1970s, resulting in considerable scholarly interest focused on war and warfare (Fukui and Turton 1979; Turton 1989, 1991) and in human responses to environmental challenges. The main message of these works, if it is possible to summarize it in a sentence, was that the deadly fights between the people of the lower Omo Valley were not signs of uncontrolled banditry but the result of a continuous human struggle under tough ecological circumstances. Violence in these small-scale societies was not a step to achieving a higher social status but a regulated responses to environmental and economic needs.

Preparing for Tourists: Ugliness Turns into Beauty

In the early 1980s, after the first scientific works were published on the lower Omo, the boom in the mass tourism industry had already occurred and given the masses the opportunity to travel more quickly and cheaply to Africa. Besides the well-known east African safari tourism destinations, Ethiopia became a feasible option for Western travelers. This was the time of the “naming phase” (MacCannell 1999: 44) of the lower Omo Valley in Western tourism discourse. The fame of the lower Omo as a wilderness enabled the Ethiopian tour companies to open a market. In the 1960s and 1970s the “Lower Omo Valley was seen as a ‘wilderness area’ with the potential to rival the leading national parks of east Africa but its isolation would make this a long term project” (Turton 1987: 172). The “naming phase” of the area was deeply embedded in the narratives of the late nineteenth century.

The main vehicles of Western perceptions of the Other living in the Ethiopian wilderness included coffee table books and magazine articles. One of the first coffee table books on the cultures of the Horn of Africa was the *African Ark: Peoples of the Horn* (Beckwith et al. 1990). In the introduction to the book, which includes photographs of the Nyangatom (Bumi in the book), Surma and Karo, it is stated that: “Forgotten by history, and as yet inadequately charted by geographers, the Lower Omo Valley forms the approximate centre of this remote zone” (1990: 249). The majority of the images show rituals (such as stick fights), or different body alteration tech-

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niques (such as lip stretching or scarification). It would be easy to conclude from these images that the rituals are daily routines for these people rather than an expression of individual or group faith (Lutz and Collins 1993: 91). For the first time since the early colonial travelers, body alteration had entered a popularized representational context. Now elements of primitivism were facilitating the commodification of local culture and instead of the repugnance of the earlier moralizing gaze, Beckwith and Fisher seek body aestheticism and beauty in order to establish the “primitive” as a new cultural subject (MacCannell 1992).

Alongside this emerging social aesthetic, other old and new tropes surfaced in the popular narrative about the lower Omo: dangerous local people, body alterations, and vanishing cultures. *Vanishing Africa*, the title of Gianni Giansanti’s (2004) coffee table book, suggests that the reader will meet with the fading era of traditional Africa and that the book has captured (and therefore salvaged) the last moments of disappearing traditions. According to the author, the reason for the disappearance of these cultures is their new contact with the modern Western world. His series of photographs of the Mursi (and also the Surma) comprise mostly close-up portraits where the eyes and the widely stretched female lower lip are highlighted. The editor chose portraits where people’s eyes appear deep and dark, their faces daubed with white paint or ash. Their gaze is hostile; they look straight into the camera, inescapably confronting the native’s gaze with the viewer’s, provoking the audience to support the hostile savage image (Lutz and Collins 1993). Some of the faces in the book were familiar to me from my fieldwork, but it took me a while to recognize them.

There are several pictures where women wear a *gavale*, a cattle head-dress, which was initially made as an adornment for cows and is only worn by people for outsiders nowadays. There are pictures where Mursi hold a *lalang*, a brass bracelet, in their mouth or a baby skirt on their head. If they did not have visitors, the Mursi would not use these objects in this way. But several times I saw how Mursi women took off their bracelets and put them into their stretched lower lip, mostly for tourists, just to increase their chances of having a photo taken.

Giansanti’s book also features firearms. The chapter titled “Mursi, the Art of Combat” stresses the importance of hostility in everyday life. Based on my field experience, I believe the photographs overemphasize the role of hostility in the Mursi community. On one double page, naked Mursi males stand on

bare, vertical tree trunk, all of them holding guns. This production of cultural commodity based on a contextualized form of hostility is a reappearance of the uncooperative primitive. Here, again, body alteration, nudity, and the presence of the guns become a commodity in the representation of the Mursi.

There are other coffee table books of this style. Bloom (2008) describes the lower Omo Valley as a land of continuous warfare and vanishing cultures, while Gilbert (2007) plays with the frontier idea when talking about Mursiland. Don McCullin (2005) presents the whole lower Omo as a dangerous land, and in his Mursi pictures we see mostly naked men with cattle headdresses on their heads.

The most radical representative of all is Hans Silvester (2006, 2008), the author of coffee table books on the lower Omo Valley. He opens one with the following lines: “An arena of incessant tribal and guerrilla warfare, and a hotbed for the arms and ivory trades, the Omo Valley nevertheless plays host—when the Kalashnikovs fall silent—to some astonishing events of a much more peaceful nature. Among the 15 tribes that have lived in this Rift region since time immemorial, the Surma and the Mursi, two tribes that get on well together, share a taste for body painting and extravagant decorations borrowed from nature” (Silvester 2008: 3). According to Silvester, he was one of the few outsiders able to survive and work there. “Just four years ago, when I first visited the Omo Valley, it was a very dangerous area. Almost every night you could hear the sound of the Kalashnikovs. The tension was palpable, and you ventured forth at your own peril” (Ibid.: 6). Like Arthur Donaldson Smith’s descriptions of the skirmishing Kere natives, Hans Silvester also pictures himself surrounded by hostility.

Although he himself has produced two popular coffee table books, probably generating a large amount of tourism to the area, Silvester argues that “tourism advances, subverting and destroying the lives of the local people even more irrevocably than civil or tribal wars” (2008: 6). He states that he had the opportunity to see the uncontaminated, traditional world of these hostile natives while contemporary travelers have no access to authenticity, as it is fading away. These lines evoke the narratives of tourists I met during my fieldwork, who often claimed that they were different from the “average tourists”: they were more knowledgeable. Usually they wanted to take “non-touristy” photos of “traditional” Mursi life.

The title of one of Silvester’s (2008) books is *Natural Fashion: Tribal Decoration from Africa*, wherein nature and its inhabitants (in this case the Suri

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[Surma], a group culturally and geographically related to the Mursi) represent a spiritual unit. The Suri “live so close to nature that they also act naturally” (Silvester 2008: 4). Nature and its people are contrasted with Western civilization or rather with civilization itself. This approach is very similar to the style of early colonial travelers in Africa, like Stanley, Speke, or Burton, but Silvester goes much further than the evolutionist and ethnocentric colonial explorers. He describes this land as the cradle of mankind, where people have not changed since prehistoric times; he positions the current society as spontaneous children. Traveling to the lower Omo, for Silvester, is time travel to the land of the infants.

There are naked children, approximately between nine and thirteen years of age, in most of the pictures, their penises and breasts often heavily exposed. Young boys hang naked from trees, run laughing on the riverbed, or just stand and stare into the camera. According to the author, the main aim of the book is to show how these people make accessories from natural materials. Therefore the children in the pictures are decorated with bunches of grasses, plenty of flowers, masses of leaves, sticks, beans, mud, and so on. They are often hardly distinguishable from the green backdrop he uses. Their bodies are painted with orange, white, red, and black paint, including their faces, arms, legs, and genitals. Sometimes these children embrace and look in different directions; in some photos, they hold mushrooms, flowers, or grass in their mouths.

The pictures in Hans Silvester’s book are a clear representation of how contemporary popular Western culture is infused with racism and how the Western imagination plays with the idea of entering a remote realm while securing itself against intolerance. Although Silvester claims to be an insider in these cultures, he presents photographs where children wear a *gavale*, women wear bull horns, and girls wear skirts on their heads. As I showed earlier with the example of Giansanti’s book, these objects are the obvious signs that these photographs were taken during a short visit where the Mursi and Surma people “dressed up” for the photographs. Other pictures in the book also give the impression that the scenes were carefully set up in order to give the imagination of the author free rein. I did not meet any people in the lower Omo region who resembled the people in the photographs in Silvester’s book and as far as I know the Mursi people would only occasionally adorn themselves in this manner if an outsider requested it.

Silvester’s book leaves local people without a social context; his strong interest in photographing only naked children suggests that no adult lives

among the Surma. According to Silvester's pictures, there are only two types of world: modern and traditional, as Lutz and Collins (1993) suggest, and the two worlds are very far apart. Worshipping and idealizing "primitive" fashion is a typifying process that continuously reproduces its subject. I completely agree with Serge Tornay (2008: 331, quoted in Abbink 2009: 894), who call Silvester's work a "photographic harassment."

Guidebooks: Educating the "Natives"

Guidebooks are a vital part of the commercialization of the lower Omo Valley and Mursi culture, and they fit into the style of the earlier representations. The first edition of the *Lonely Planet: Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti* says: "The Lower Omo Valley is still an incredibly remote place—one of the reasons it has remained so 'unchanged,' and undoubtedly one of its attractions" (Gordon 2000: 237). What is remote inevitably depends on the writer's position and point of view. As the author defines physical remoteness, the concept of the geographical frontier constantly reshapes a mental cultural model. As we saw before, coffee table books tend to shape the image of a place, implying there is no other point of view, and this approach is constantly supported by the earlier mentioned frontier theory. Here, political aspirations turn into the commodification of cultural difference. Gordon takes up this mission with an intriguing task. Besides the oft-cited harsh natural environment and hostile natives they report on the people of the lower Omo Valley as thieves: "Camps should never be left unattended, and all jewelry including watches is best removed before you mingle with some groups such as the Mursi" (2000: 237). This was the first book to widely introduced this idea; it goes on to say: "particularly the Mursi, have got very good at intimidating tourists—by throwing hysterics, shouting, or even grabbing your hands and not letting go" (Gordon 2000: 237).

This form of contextualizing cultural difference is part of the civilizing process; as a guidebook should, *Lonely Planet: Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti* gives practical advice on how tourists can avoid difficulties during their trip. For example, the book argues that tourists should give practical gifts to the Mursi, such as razor blades, soap, or beads, instead of money. But what is practical is obviously culturally dependent. This advice not only evokes the image of the colonial traveler who distributes beads to the natives

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but expresses the idea that the Mursi people are too ignorant to use cash in a proper way, so it is best not to give it to them. The fact that so many Mursi women buy clothes, medicine, grain, dishes, and plastic jerry cans using the money that they get from tourists is ignored.

Gordon (2000) describes Mursiland as a well-defined space comprising certain places, sometimes invented spots or often existing places with names that, as later turned out, were fictional. I was often surprised when I heard tourists talking about Mursiland. Their itineraries were made up of directions, roads, and places that were unknown to me, even at the end of my fieldwork, when I had gone through most parts of Mursiland, and I knew the area that was accessible to tourists. For example, Gordon (2000) refers to the “Omo Mursi” and the “Hana Mursi,” and it took me a while to realize what these names were. The book’s map finally confirmed it—tourists who travel to the end of the only road that passes through Mursiland call the people there “Omo Mursi” and subsequently, this name became an indicator of an autonomous Mursi group produced by outsiders like tour operating companies or guidebooks. “Hana Mursi” indicates the town of Hana, where tour guides occasionally bring tourists, in the territory of the Bodi people, a different ethno-linguistic group from the Mursi. The map in the third edition of the *Lonely Planet: Ethiopia & Eritrea Travel Guide* (Philips and Corillet 2006) does not show the “Omo Mursi” at the Omo River but at a place called Maganto, a junction between Hana and the Omo River. It is noteworthy how this imaginative ethnic identity gains its peripatetic character. These names are important in the contemporary tourism discourse and are clear indicators of how the tourism industry reshapes a given territory according to stereotypes and gives new identities to a particular place in a given region.

The Bradt guidebook to Ethiopia (Briggs 2008) also devotes long sections to the lower Omo Valley and to the Mursi in a slightly more moderate way than the *Lonely Planet*. “The most celebrated residents of south Omo are undoubtedly the Mursi who are well known by their lip-plates,” as Briggs (2008) says and the author contemplates how different are encounters in 2008 than they were a decade before between the Mursi and their visitors.¹³

Tour Operating Companies' Websites and Tourist Blogs

Ethiopian tour operating companies' websites further contextualize cultural difference into sellable stereotypes. The language and the iconography of the Mursi and the lower Omo Valley show the continuity of the colonial narratives. Here the notion of history belongs to Ethiopia's central and northern regions, while the timeless wilderness with barbarian people is associated with the southwestern part of the country. Most tour operating companies' websites rank and classify the cultures of the country.

The website of the Timeless Ethiopia Tour Company labels as "civilization" the northern part of the country while the label "tribal culture" covers their Omo trips.¹⁴ On the website of Green Land Tours and Travel, one of the biggest tour operating companies of Ethiopia, there is a similar division between "historic routes" and the "South and South-Western circuits." The website says: "Further South is the Omo Valley with its popular ethnic treasures. This is where about 50% of Ethiopia's ethnic groups live: the Konso with their terraced agriculture and rituals; the Mursi with their clay lip-plates and barbarian life style." The company's south Omo itinerary advises: "Proceed to the Mursi people and villages. Admire these tribes. Where for beauty women used to put clay plates into their lips, men have different scarification and more particularities."¹⁵

The Getts, another company that frequently brings tourists to the south Omo, uses similar tropes in its narratives. Its website states: "To anthropologists, South Omo is not far from being the proverbial 'Living Museum'—a museum whose inhabitants seem intent on rituals and decorations. Body scarring, lip-plates, bull jumping—in different parts of South Omo these are all parts of the way of life." In one of the itineraries the third day is the Mursi day: "Drive through the natural forests and undulating terrains across the Mago River and visit the Mursi Villages. Undeniably, the highlight of your Omo Safari will be the visit of the Mursi women who wear clay lip-plates."¹⁶

These narratives inevitably evoke the pre-colonial imagery produced by travelers, soldiers, and explorers at the end of the nineteenth century, with the difference that contemporary narratives seek to attract other travelers rather than warning them away from the area. The "ex-primitives" are seen as an attractive commodity, their photographs a visual form of marketing. Although the Western narratives about the same space are very similar

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within a 120-year span, today's tourism industry narratives on the Mursi are a product of early presentations. These websites skillfully use colonial stereotypes to create an ethno-commodity (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009).

The main dissimilarity between the colonial context and the post-modern one is that today, producers and consumers of images can easily correspond with each other. Here, the interactive tourism blogs and finally the Mursi peoples' own brochure come into play. "Today I visited hell" writes a tourist in a blog on his Mursi trip and continues: "it was searing hot, there were demon-like characters, and much physical sufferings."¹⁷ These outsiders' points of view demonstrate how ordinary people live these encounters and their views of the Mursi. "We pulled up to the Mursi village and were instantly surrounded by Mursi women and children screaming 'photo ... photo ... photo ...' They grab you by the arms, yank your shirt, poked me in the boobs and rear end, practically stood on my feet with piercing screams of 'photo ... photo ...'"¹⁸ Tourists warn each other not to take pictures of the Mursi without initial agreement on the price and to be prepared for aggressive communication and for a harsh natural environment: "Johnny had warned me about the Mursi people. It was an echo of the *Lonely Planet* write up. After reading it, I felt sufficiently warned and made my careful preparations for the visit. Off came the watch, glasses, ring, and money belt."¹⁹

In this meta-communication about the Mursi-alien contact zone different dialogues intersect with each other and it became one meta-narrative where lately the Mursi also gave voice to their opinion. In 2008, Milisha Olibui, a then young Mursi boy, created a leaflet about his culture in order to inform tourists that the Mursi customs are much more complex and maybe need more time to understand than quick visits allow. His aim is to inform Outsiders that "we don't want you to just come and look at us like animals in a zoo! We would prefer that you understand a little about us than just a few minutes." Ultimately the Mursi contributed to the process of the image-making of the Mursi; they raised their voices against the sexualized, unhistorical, ideological, political, and exotic Mursi image, and they tried to communicate that their land is not a zoo or an open museum as tour operator companies stated before. However, there are many Mursi people who migrate to the tourist contact zone in order to be photographed and paid by tourists.²⁰

Conclusion

To understand the surplus value that contemporary popular culture imputes into the “ex-primitive,” we have to reconfigure and extend our hermeneutic approach and apply visual-historiography to this politicized semiotic play. The cultural Other is contextualized and formulated in time (Fabian 1983), and its representations reflect global hegemony (Pieterse 1992). My starting image, the Mursi with the iPod, is the most recent form of this hegemonic cultural exclusion. The aim of the image is to polemicize the elements of a traditional, non-Western culture with the latest Western technology in order to reinforce the civilized-primitive counterpoint (Meiu 2011). As I have demonstrated, this attempt is not new, as counterpoints such as nude-clothed, deformed-normal, dangerous-safe, childish-adult, timeless-historical, frontier-centre all served as cultural demarcations in the past or using Taussig’s (1987) concept these all belong to the mnemonic of focal points in the history of culture contact between a small-scale African society and outsider agents. Here, the trope of the primitive is created in a social theater (in this case, literally in front of a backdrop) contrasting technological advancement with the pretence of a chattel-less society. In Western popular imagination, a woman who wears an enormous lip-plate and holds an iPod in her hand represents the dichotomy of the technologically advanced Western world and the “primitive” world of Africa. Therefore this image is not only the contemporary form of the civilizing mission but also a Western way of poking fun at how Africans look together with Western goods, where the laughter and amusement “demarcates the frontier between cultural worlds” (Pieterse 1992: 98).

Therefore the image of the iPod reinforces the image of the traditional Mursi in the Western tourist imagination. This image demarcates cultural frontiers, creating a cultural nexus where the Western fascination with machinery is the basis of a social scene. This is not a new type of social scene: Western “explorers,” travelers, and ethnographers often made an effort to depict the “primitives” together with “magical” technology (phonographs, for example) (Taussig 1993). It is the Western fascination with the “primitive’s” imagined fascination of Western things. And the Mursi, increasingly exposed to the frictions of international connections, become unable to control this fascination. Local people increasingly migrate to the tourist contact zone in the hope of being photographed and paid by tourists

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and the outsiders' fascination with the Mursi spawns a new contact culture. During my fieldwork I recorded emerging Mursi cultural responses to the tourists' visual expectations based on a broad socio-historical context. As I have argued here, in order to fully understand people's behavior in tourist contact zones, it is necessary to contextualize the underpinning imagery that these encounters embedded.

Notes

1. I carried out my first fieldtrip to study the Mursi in 1999 (Régi 2001), staying for longer to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in 2008–2009. An earlier draft of this text was presented at the “Tatu: Visual Traditions of Eastern Africa” workshop at Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford University, in 2010. I am grateful for the invitation from the organisers and for the comments I received from the participants.
2. A small-scale agro-pastoralist society living in southwestern Ethiopia, close to the Sudan and Kenyan borderland, along the lower Omo River. They number between seven and nine thousand and only in the past twenty years have they had active, daily contact with Western tourists.
3. The Ari is an ethnic group who are neighbours of the Mursi.
4. When Taussig uses this phrase, he refers to Walter Benjamin's (1968) essay.
5. <http://lumq.com/06/mursi> (accessed 15 April 2012).
6. The people mentioned under the name of Murle, at the turn of the twentieth century, were possibly a section of the Nyangatom people (Tornay 1981).
7. Several colonial authors noted the stretched lower lips of the female Murle. The hunter-traveler Arthur Neumann (1898) described the “ugliness” of the Murle women; he is the only author to have noted the presence of a smaller lip-stick in their upper lip. Among recent scholars LaTosky (2006) and Fayers-Kerr (2012) discuss the cultural background and the social esteem of lip plate in the Mursi society.
8. The Suri people are the cultural and geographical neighbor of the Mursi. Suri women also wear lip plates.
9. It is worth to mention that there is, and always was, a racist and exoticizing African look on other Africans. It is not only “Western” travelers who regard “lowland” cultural customs embarrassing with signs of primitivism. Highland Ethiopians were often more shocked by the body treatment (nakedness, lip plate, scarification) of the Mursi and this embarrassment informed internal policies even to the highest political level.
10. There are different forms of this word in the literature, but the main noun comes from Amharic.
11. It is not possible to compare the different types of accounts produced on south Ethiopia with those on the other side of the border in Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda. It

- is sufficient to mention Godfrey Leinhardt's Dinka monograph (1961); Evans Pritchard's Nuer trilogy (1940, 1951, 1956); Lewis's work on the Murle (1972); Dyson-Hudson's work on the Karimojong (1966), and Gulliver's work on the Jie and Turkana (1955). The production of the popular image of east African people, such as Leni Riefenstahl Nuba's photographs from the 1970s (1973, 1976), resulted in a strong and relentless depiction of the "natives" of East Africa.
12. Uri Almagor among the Dassanetch in 1968; Serge Tornay among the Nyangatom in 1970; Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker with the Hamar in 1970; Katsuyoshi Fukui with the Bodi in 1973; and David Turton among the Mursi in 1969.
 13. It is interesting to note that in the first edition of Briggs's (1995) *Guide to Ethiopia* he does not talk about the Mursi and a Mursi trip experience. He briefly mentions that the Mursi is the most visited group in the area and describes their lip plate custom.
 14. <http://www.timelessethiopia.com> (accessed 15 April 2012).
 15. <http://www.greenlandethiopia.com/eng/sswcircuit.htm> (accessed 15 April 2012).
 16. <http://www.getts.com.et/getts019.htm> (accessed 2 May 2002).
 17. <http://www.gabrielopenshaw.com/EthiopiaMursi.html> (accessed 30 October 2010).
 18. http://www.travelswithsheila.com/mago_national_park_and_the_mur.html (accessed 15 April 2012).
 19. http://www.phillipmartin.info/webpage/travel/africa/text_ethiopia_omomursi.htm (accessed 15 April 2012).
 20. To discuss this movement and special cultural performance is not in the scope of the visual-historiography I present here, but I discuss the different Mursi performances for tourists, the Mursi migration to the tourist contact zone elsewhere (Régi 2011, 2012, 2013).

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