Tourism, leisure and work in an east African pastoral society

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Fig. 1. *Tourists prepare a photo shoot in Mursiland.*

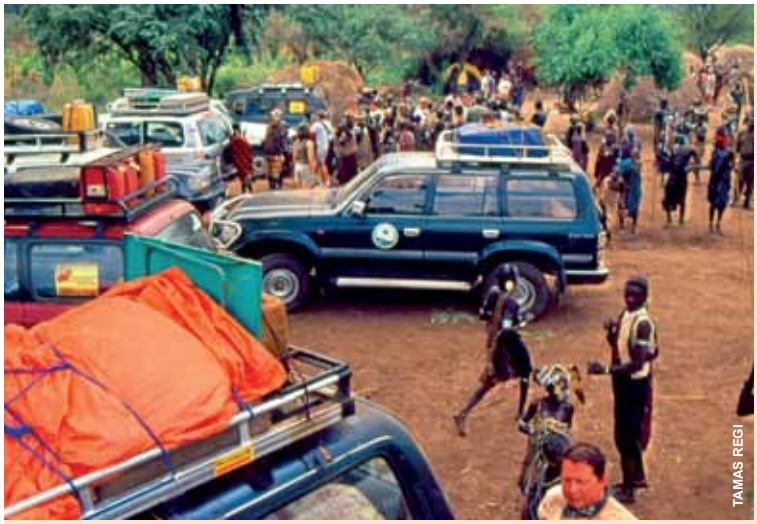
No society exists solely by means of productive work (Rojek 2000); people, in every time and place, have devised ways of organizing non-utilitarian activities. Anthropologists have shown an interest in expressive acts and in works from Edward B. Tylor's *The art of pleasure* to Clifford Geertz's *Deep play* and Tim Ingold's *Being alive*, recreation and leisure have played an important role. However, the field of leisure studies involves refined sociological theories, and anthropologists still struggle to address the concept of leisure within their studies. Questions like 'is leisure a cross-cultural concept?' and 'how is leisure practiced in non-industrial societies?' make ethnographers cautious about any propositions surrounding the 'universal' reality of leisure experience. Garry Chick, a leading academic in the field of leisure anthropology, argues that leisure is a cross-cultural universal concept and it should be studied accordingly as it is consistent with other aspects of human culture (1998, 2006).

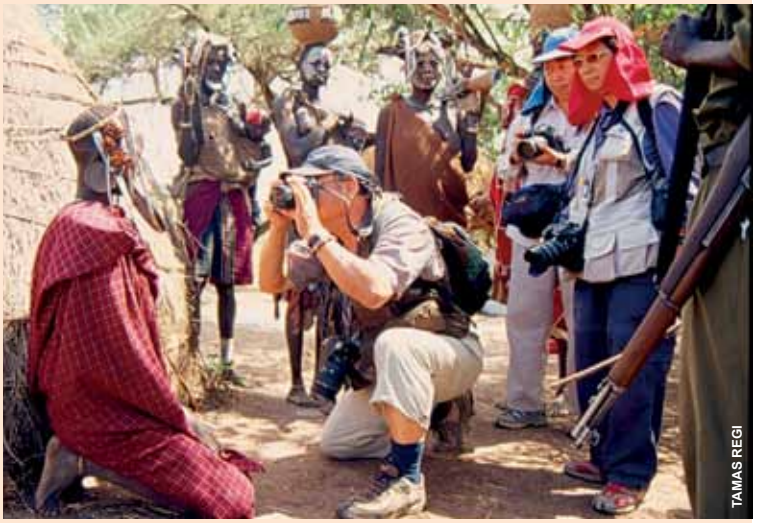
In this sense, he does not distance himself far from the current sociological standpoint, led by Chris Rojek who argues in a similar vein. Rojek (1995, 2000, 2010) rejects the idea of the modernist 'work versus free time' relational dichotomy (mostly advocated by Pieper 1952 and Dumazedier 1974) to argue that leisure time is not freer than any other time that is not devoted to relaxation. On the contrary, leisure often requires more planning, and more physical and mental effort, than work activities and such activities must conform to cultural and social expectations. Leisure is a politically and economically controlled activity. Leisure (and consequently work) is embedded in the context of other cultural morals, social rhythms or economic desires; it is fixed in cultural controls and (post) modernity is an essential context to emphasize these constraining forces. This influential sociological discourse is based on the evolution and current state of capitalism, industrial production, modernism and postmodernism, leaving still empty-handed the anthropologists who work with non-industrial societies.

In this article, I argue that to address this dilemma, we should investigate what happens with leisure experience in cultural friction (Tsing 2005). I propose that, instead of regarding leisure as a fixed human condition within one society, it might be approached as a process that evolves when different societies meet. My aim is to present leisure not as an existing social form among one group of people, but rather as a constantly emerging (and disappearing) practice in cross-cultural encounters. Tourism, though studied broadly from an anthropological point of view, offers an excellent field for this investigation. The Western ideology of leisure, mobilized by tourists in non-Western settings, is a good entrance point to make tangible how societies undertake leisure pursuits in intercultural encounters.

What I propose here is an interpretation of leisure encounters on the micro-scale in an African cultural environment. Referring to the Mursi, a relatively small-scale, southwestern Ethiopian pastoral group as an example, I discuss how people, following a pattern of everyday activities, change their actions when they meet with international tourists. I show how international tourists misunderstand the everyday Mursi practices and ask their hosts to imitate different labour activities at times when they

I am grateful to the British Institute in Eastern Africa for supporting my research. The Centre for Tourism and Cultural Change at Leeds Metropolitan University was also supportive, and I wish to thank David Turton, Simone Abram and the three AT reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of this text.





(left to right and above to below)
Fig 2. *Some Mursi settlements are fully crammed with tourist cars every morning.*
Fig 3. *Preparing for tourists: Mursi teenage girls paint each other's faces.*
Fig 4. *Simulating labour: a Mursi woman clearing sorghum with wind.*
Fig 5. *Some Mursi women would be photographed by multiple tourists in succession.*
Fig 6. *Ready for a picture: cattle horn and ornament on a woman's head.*
Fig 7. *Mursi women argue with a tourist over payment for photographs.*

(From above to below, left to right)
Fig. 8. *A tourist takes instructions from a Mursi woman on how to grind.*
Fig. 9. *A tourist photographs a Mursi woman with a large lip plate.*
Fig. 10. *A young Mursi girl poses for tourists taking a photograph..*
Fig. 11. *Young Mursi women.*
Fig. 12. *Two Mursi women posing for tourists in front of their hut.*
Fig. 13. *As the sun sets on the horizon the Mursi talking groups get looser.*
Fig. 14. *Holes left in the lips by wearing of plates are highlighted for a photo shoot.*

would not engage in such pursuits. Here leisure and work intertwine as tourists spend their leisure time imitating the Mursi's working practices, such as grinding with stones or collecting firewood. By doing this, the visitors provoke a novel cultural reaction in this group and create a new tempo in their everyday life.

Kiibai and *tirainya:* playing with words in the shade

The Mursi are a semi-nomadic group, numbering about 8,000, who live in the lower Omo valley in southwestern Ethiopia. Their economy is based on cattle keeping and on rain-fed and flood-retreat cultivation along the Omo River. Their yearly activities and seasonal movements are largely dictated by two rainy periods (March-April and September-October) and the annual flooding of the Omo River (Turton & Ruggles 1978). The Mursi year (*berghu*[1]) can be divided into seasons according to such activities as herding cattle, scaring birds from the sorghum and maize fields, clearing the fields and planting and harvesting.

The settlements are often noisy as people sit in groups, laughing and telling stories while resting on stools, lying in the shade under the trees. These tree shades (*rijô*) give form to the social landscape as they are where people come to socialize: to talk and rest. When the shade moves, the group moves with it, pressing closer together as it becomes smaller. Actions are undertaken according to the movements of the sun (*su*) and the shade. Conversely, *su* is regarded as a negative entity obstructing productivity, drying up surface water thereby harming both animals and men and curtailing social events. Only the socially unskilled, the fools (*babi*) walk or work when the 'sun is hot' (*su a bureni*).

The dialectic of *rijô* and *su* demarcates not only different social actions but also the opposed categories of culture (creating sociality in the shade) and nature (fighting against the uncontrollable power of the sun). When I asked people what they were doing as they sat and talked, waiting for milk before sunset or just simply resting in the shade in the hottest part of the day, they would often reply '*anye kiibai hung*': 'I'm just sitting'. *Kiibai* is not used for describing night-time sleep (*tungu*) and is distinguished from other daytime activities such as collecting firewood or wild plants, fetching water, planting, looking after the cattle etc. People describe their 'non-active', 'non-mobile' social activities with the term *kiibai*, whatever the predominant seasonal activity. This word applies to smaller time periods within the overall season, and all Mursi activities described as *kiibai* have equal significance to activities described as work (*deshê or deshinena*). Activities such as collecting firewood, fetching water from the river, making porridge, cooking soup or cleaning animal skin are all described with the phrase *deshê.* The phrase *deshinena* is simply used for being busy with something. A person who doesn't want to work is *karkari*, meaning lazy or tired of work; being a respected male member of the community requires one to be considered a *kadingyogi:* a hardworking person.

Kiibai is cultural work whilst *deshê* relates to physical work; both need to be undertaken to be socially accepted in the Mursi society. To avoid work is no less ignoble than to fail to engage in leisure activities in a culturally appropriate way. An adult should be able to *kiibai* in a culturally appropriate form, in a socially clearly embedded frame. Someone who does not converse with his fellows during a period of *kiibai* is a 'cultural stutterer' (*kadha lôgo*). Sitting and talking with people, telling stories and bringing good news is probably the key activity in a Mursi person's social acceptance. *Kiibai* is a kind of knowledge best described as 'playing', and as such it is a cultural understanding that alien travellers, such as tourists, don't have. *Kiibai* is playing with the language and playing with the listeners, just as the beautiful Mursi word *tirainya* means equally 'to talk' and 'to play'. Children's play, for example with small bull heads made by mud, or building miniature houses from grass, is described as *tirainya*. Just after sunset kids, teenagers and young adults often gather under a big tree and sing and clap together for hours. Children run around, joining and leaving the group, and chasing each other in the twilight. All these acts can be described as *tirainya*.

But adults also play, or more precisely, take part in plays. In their play, also described with the word *tirainya*, they talk, telling stories and anecdotes, recalling events or just discussing what they have heard in another settlement. Oratory skill among the Mursi allows them to control inter-subjective relationships, to connect to each other through wordplay. The word *tirainya*, reconnecting the cultural learning of childhood with the mastery of adult culture, is a controlling mechanism, or as Jerome Bruner (1976: 31 quoted in Jackson 1998: 30) said about mastery play, 'a special form of violating fixity'. In my understanding, this (cultural and social) play, in which we 'toy with, reconstrue, reauthor, and reverse a situation in which we find ourselves confounded and unfree' (Jackson 1998:30) can be seen as a basis of *tirainya*. Spending time in the shade, playing together with talk, is a cultural game; or more precisely in this sense: culture is a game and anyone who doesn't know the rules is excluded from the playing field.

Working for the tourists

Along the dusty road that cuts through northern Mursiland, new Mursi settlements emerge every few months. People move there from other parts of Mursiland to live in temporary dwellings for weeks at a time, to earn money from tourists who pay fees for each photograph they take and for each car entering the settlements. Regardless of the month or the season, the people in the tourist settlements expect to receive visitors each day. I spent most of my fieldwork in one of these settlements, Solbu, observing hundreds of Mursi-tourist encounters.

Every morning, around eight o'clock, the women and the children start to prepare themselves for the tourists. They help paint each other's faces and bodies, the process taking about half an hour (see Fig. 3). The men also do this, but painting the body is primarily the women's realm. People then sit and chat in gender-segregated groups, until the first car arrives, usually by nine o'clock. It is mostly women and children, but younger boys too, who crowd around the vehicles. When the tourists get out of their cars, the Mursi immediately ask them to take their photos. In this situation, physical contact is unavoidable. The Mursi pull at the tourists' shoulders, pat their hands, drag at their wrists, and generally try to attract their attention as quickly as possible by any means. Older women, either married or widowed, often sit in front of the houses and shout to the tourists to try to get them to take their pictures. In this way, and by clapping hands, screaming, whistling and slapping their chests, the Mursi attract the tourists' attention in order to have their photograph taken. Talking in raised voices, the Mursi seek to get their visitors to follow them to take their picture. Then, usually with the help of their guide (one of the Mago National Park scouts or one of the local Mursi men), the tourists choose the Mursi whom they want to photograph.

Apart from the special 'make up' used for outsiders, most of the Mursi women show off their work or imitate their working activities for the tourists: grinding sorghum, cleaning grain, scratching animal skin, making lip-plates and roasting maize are the major activities. After the tourists leave, the Mursi women usually stop these activities, sometimes as soon as the tourists have left their house, even if they are still in the area. The tourists are generally interested in these scenes of labour, and often ask permis-

1. The spelling of the Mursi words in the article follows Turton, Yigezu & Olibui (2008).

2. The Mursi word *ejô* is used both for shooting a gun and taking a photograph.

3. See a summary of reports on this at: http://www.mursi.org/news-items/huge-irrigation-scheme-planned-for-the-lower-omo-valley

sion from the Mursi to engage in the activities themselves. The most popular of these is grinding, which is an attractive photo topic (see Fig. 8). The tourists kneel down and try to grind sorghum or corn with the stones and Mursi women help them in the process. The process is documented by the other tourists in the party and does not last longer than a couple of minutes.

While the Mursi cease their *kiibai* and imitate work for the benefit of the tourists, the tourists imitate the Mursi's activities which are themselves a theatrical representation of work. In their specially created 'model' villages, the Mursi imitate 'traditional' sociality. In these staged scenes, they mimic their own working activities. The rigid concepts of leisure and work are blurred by performances in a constantly changing social order. Mursi people 'work' (by grinding sorghum for example) to produce a cash income from their visitors, but it is a display of their work and thus a replication – a reproduction. Places have a dual purpose representing both leisure and work: the same piece of shade is a place of *kiibai* at one minute and a place of imitated work the next; then it stops functioning as a working space for the Mursi and becomes a leisure space for the tourists. This fluid relational meaning of work and leisure illuminates the precariousness and the importance of these two notions and how they can reformulate in cultural friction. Tourists' concepts of leisure and work are mobilized, and this acts as an open link between individuals from different cultural conditions. This link permits societies not only to encounter but also to re-moralize their experience of leisure and work.

Performing for tourists is not regarded as *kiibai* or *deshê* but as a means of getting (*iwa*) money. Whenever I asked the Mursi people who participated in the tourist encounters to discuss their activities, they used the phrase *iwa* instead of the word *deshê*. *Iwa* means 'to get' or 'to take', and in this sense has an opposite connotation to the productive nature of the *deshê* word. The actual process (performing for the tourists and posing for photographs) the Mursi describe with the phrase *iwa* maintains a social distance, through a recently developed exchange mode, between tourists and the Mursi. Contrary to this, the *deshê*, in my understanding, is an organizing idiom that implies social proximity between the members of the Mursi community. Under the conditions of *deshê*, people, through the appropriation of domestic resources, create access to other community members (working parties, household members or guest relationships, for example) and cultivate their social self through the working activities which incur respect. *Iwa* is based on the 'economy of conjuring' (Tsing 2005); *deshê* is social self-identification through production.

This system is derived from the tourists' conscious and unconscious fascination with how others live differently ('oh, look, they still don't use electricity'; 'look, they use stones to make tools' etc.) and their desire to physically experience this different way ('let's try it'; 'it's so difficult to grind with stones' etc.). This moralized leisure, based on idealized elements of the other's culture, is a return to the space of romanticized work and its signifiers. Tourists, through their 'escape' or free time moralize and imagine a production mode different from their own; through physical engagement, they compare their own ways of working with their hosts' ('oh, it is so difficult to do').

The uneasiness of the encounters, which is due to the commercial Mursi attitude that disappoints most tourists, is the outcome of the Mursi's firm opinion about these leisure-travellers. The Mursi do not translate tourist activities as *tirainya* or *kiibai*, concepts which are the closest approximations of my understanding of the Western leisure experience. When I spoke to the Mursi people about the tourists, it was apparent that they simply could not understand why the latter came to see them every day. My explanation, that they came because they were curious, was simply rejected by most Mursi. Few of them could understand or believe in the idea of Western curiosity, fascination or leisure, so they regarded tourists as thieves stealing images with their cameras.[2] As the Mursi said, photography is a white men's thing; tourists are the people who 'take' photographs (Turton 2004).

Yet although photography was always mentioned pejoratively, it was the only means for most Mursi people to engage in an economic relationship, namely to earn money. Therefore, as I mentioned above, the word *iwa* is the one most used to describe the tourists' activities and is incorporated into Mursi claims that tourists were unable or unwilling to give 'enough' in return. Persistent Mursi complaints about failed reciprocities between them and their visitors, is rooted in the Mursi belief that white tourists have a plenty of money and that sharing does not pose problems for them. This economic moralization, however, cannot accommodate the concept of leisure-seeking white tourists, and the social aesthetic that the Mursi construct through their performances is a balancing mechanism which tries to stabilize an almost impossible economic deal; as Dean MacCannell suggests, 'these performances and aesthetic-economic exchanges may be the creative cutting edge of world culture in the making' (1992: 33). Such trade-offs between 'leisure' and 'work' are typical of the process we call globalization.

The end of the play and talk

Tourism does not exist in a vacuum, insulated from the global and national political economy. In this case, Mursiland and its wider geographical setting, the lower Omo valley, is the hub of a current international debate. The Ethiopian government is building a hydroelectric dam, known as Gibe III, in the middle basin of the Omo River. Due to begin operating in 2013, this will create the second biggest dam reservoir in sub-Saharan Africa and eliminate the annual floods. This will change the lives of around 90,000 people residing downstream, including the Mursi and seven other ethnic groups. Moreover, the government has allocated a huge area of agricultural and grazing land in the lower Omo to the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation for the production of sugar cane and the construction of six sugar processing plants. The Human Rights Watch (2012), the African Resource Working Group (ARWG 2008) and several international NGOs (non-governmental organizations), including International Rivers, USAID and Survival International, have criticized the Gibe III Hydroelectric Dam project,[3] and the World Bank and the European Investment Bank have both refused to be involved. These organizations argue that the dam will not provide enough water for flood retreat cultivation and will keep back fertile soil deposits for the people living along the lower Omo, who will not be able to pursue the river flood cultivation which provides around 60 percent of their income.

After listening to the complaints of the Mursi people about these government projects, it was apparent to me that what they fear most is the loss of their 'traditional' working activities, which give meaning and purpose to their lives. They reject the government's suggested cultural model based on a new conception of labour. In this sense, the Mursi presentations for tourists and their performed sociality are different from other production modes, such as cattle herding or cultivation, which the Mursi still see as their primary means of prosperity. But, unfortunately, as the Mursi people are increasingly exposed to the different forms of global connections and as the Ethiopian government and international investors gradually encompass their land, the possibility for *tirainya*, the opportunity to play and talk, is rapidly diminishing. ●

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