MAKING ‘THE MURSI’

By Leslie Woodhead

“Being with the Mursi has become the most absorbing business of my life”. I wrote that in my diary 33 years ago, and today it feels more true than ever. The documentaries I have made alongside David Turton with the Mursi, half a dozen now since 1974, continue to occupy a unique place in my professional and personal life. Over the years, filming with the Mursi has become much more than another episode in a documentary career which stretches back now to the 1960s. In recording the evolving story of how a small group of cattle herders in South West Ethiopia are dealing with the increasing challenges of the world beyond their horizon, I have also been confronted with uncomfortable realities about the condition of all our lives in the 21st century.

My first involvement with the Mursi was an accident. In 1974, Granada TV’s pioneering series of Anthropological documentaries DISAPPEARING WORLD was planning to make a film with a people called the Mursi. Manchester University Anthropologist David Turton, who had worked with the Mursi for half a dozen years, advised that we should focus our film on the remarkable public debates through which the group resolves important issues. Granada asked a colleague with experience in making films about conflict resolution to work on the film. A sensible man, he asked that a doctor should be part of the team in Ethiopia’s remote Omo valley. Since it was judged this was logistically impractical, I was asked to step in. Naive and foolhardy, I agreed. I had no idea what awaited me.

I had never spent a night in a tent. It was, I quickly discovered, the least of my problems. Within days of arriving on the edge of Mursi country, my little team - cameraman, sound recordist, and researcher - were scattered across miles of bush, trying to ferry our equipment through a tribal war between the Mursi and their neighbours, the Bodi. It rained endlessly. The very idea of making a film seemed remote.

And film-making in those pre-digital days was a cumbersome business. We shot on 16 mm film, each roll lasting just over 10 minutes. As a consequence, we had to slog 80 metal film cans along with camera, tape recorder and tape stock, heavy wooden tripod,batteries and generator, plus food and camping equipment for our 6 weeks on location - around 600 kilos in all. We had flown in an ancient jeep, hoping to transport us and our burdens, but it promptly expired, leaving us

with a 30 mile trek through enemy territory into Mursi country. In the end as so often during later films, we were rescued by the Mursi. Turton recruited dozens of men, and they helped to porter our chaotic band into the heart - or "stomach" as they called it - of Mursi country.

At last, after days of confusion, we were able to start filming. I had recruited my favourite documentary crew, Mike Dodds and Christian Wangler who had filmed with me in many tough spots. The Mursi were something else. I will never forget the spectacle of that first debate, an orderly succession of elegant blue-black men, striding up and down addressing dozens of others sitting under a huge shade tree.The subject, Turton whispered, was the war, and where to move the precious Mursi cattle for safety. Several speakers emphasised their words with a spear. Women, with their distinctive lip plates, sat together at a distance.

For me, the excitements, problems and frustrations of filming that debate were to become familiar over my 3 decades of filming with the Mursi. First, there was the fact that I had no idea what was being said. There was the scramble to reload film magazines without allowing light to leak in and fog the footage, and the struggle to keep the lens free from condensation and insects. And there was the inevitable documentary dilemma - how to film an event without changing its nature.

In fact, my concerns about intrusion were soon alleviated. The Mursi were far more interested in their debate than our filming antics - which must have been unfathomable anyway. There were moments over the following weeks when people fretted about the presence of the camera - " the eye" the Mursi called it- and the microphone - "the ear ". Mostly, though, they seemed to look at us us with an amused tolerance. We were people with no cattle and bad feet. As we were with Turton, they were prepared to put up with our strange contortions with the eye and the ear.

I knew within minutes I had to find a new way of film making. For a decade, I had been an itinerant documentary nomad, dipping into the world's hotspots in Africa and Asia and South America as a Producer/ Director for Granada's WORLD IN ACTION series. All of us on WORLD IN ACTION were well-supplied with the arrogance of young television folk then and now. I was accustomed to total control over my films - directing, researching, interviewing, editing, scripting , narrating. Filming with the Mursi, it was immediately clear that this way of working would be impossible. I didn't understand what was happening , what they were saying, how they were thinking, what they might do next. For all of this, I would have to work closely with Turton.

David has always been uncomfortable with the contrivances of film making. Working alone for years, encumbered by no more than a notebook, he inevitably found the practicalities of documentary cumbersome and frustrating. Our basic tools were the Eclair Camera and Nagra tape recorder, which had revolutionised documentary making since the mid 60s. Lightweight, and enabling fluid hand-held observation, they had liberated film makers from the limitations of tripods and static setups. But for Turton, we still seemed sometimes to be missing the natural flow of events and imposing our own technical priorities.

Our need to get camera and microphone close to the people and the action unsettled him; synchronsing picture and sound with a clapper board made him wince. And my fumbling to find a narrative coherence in the things we were shooting sometimes seemed to him an artificial imposition.

But over the days and weeks , film maker and anthropologist evolved a way of working together which has matured over 30 years and 5 further films. I tried to modify old documentary habits, and David worked to keep me aware of what the Mursi were saying and doing. Each evening, I asked him to talk about what we had been filming that day, and his comments became a soundtrack for the edited film. On that first collaboration, we trekked between 19 campsites, following the debates and the war. It rained every day, and I couldn't imagine it would ever end. But it was consumingly interesting, and I was hooked.

Back at last in the Manchester studios, I began the daunting job of distilling 15 hours of film into a 52 minute television documentary. Editing has always been my favourite part of the documentary process, a time when the messy realities of shooting are safely stored on film, and a coherent shape can be evolved.

But editing 'The Mursi' meant abandoning many of my usual ways of working. I liked to shut myself away with an editor for 6 weeks, resentful of any interruption. Now I needed Turton's daily input. His translations of the hours of debate and conversation were the lifeline of the film. The business of fitting those translations to the film involved a hugely labour-intensive process for both of us.

While we were shooting, David had worked tirelessly with Mursi helpers to refine his understanding of what we had filmed. Back in Manchester, he spoke a translation onto a tape recorder, alternating Mursi speech with his interpretations. In the editing room, I used David's

tapes to select the relevant material, matching the sound of Mursi talk with the film, phrase by phrase. The familiar sound of Mursi talk filled my editing room for days and weeks.

The final stage was to turn David's translations into subtitles, 500 or more. Granada's decision to pioneer on television the use of subtitles for the DISAPPEARING WORLD series in 1974 was extraordinarily bold. Seen from the perspective of television in the early 21st century, it seems barely credible - particularly since DISAPPEARING WORLD was broadcast in peak time at 8pm after Coronation Street . Brian Moser, the originator and Editor of the series, persuaded Granada that, since the central idea of DISAPPEARING WORLD was to allow the people filmed to speak for themselves, it was vital that their voices should he heard without intervening translator's voices. It was a crucial innovation - but it presented major challenges to Producers and Anthropologists.

In the editing room, I grappled with a hard calculus, refining the permutations of letters and spaces which would convey the Mursi words as accurately as possible, while putting them on the screen at a pace which would allow viewers to read them. By trial and error, we evolved elaborate guidelines for ourselves which became our templates for subtitling over the following quarter of a century.

There remained of course the problem of how to actually print the words on the film. In an age when digital captioning was a science-fiction dream, subtitling the first Mursi film involved a bizarre procedure which seemed to owe more to William Caxton than to John Logie Baird. We had to send off a copy of the completed film to Sweden where a specialist constructed tiny printing blocks for each of the 500 titles and etched them onto the film. The result was pretty crude, but we had our subtitles at last.

A few weeks after 'The Mursi' was transmitted on TV in October 1974, I found that I , like my film crew, had malaria. The School of Tropical Medicine who treated us was delighted to have found a previously unknown strain.

I found I had also caught a virus of a rarer kind - an obsession with the Mursi. Over the three decades since that first film, I have returned to Mursi country with David Turton to make 5 more films. Life has changed dramatically for them over the years, and the ways of film making have also evolved. By the time I went back in 2001 to make "Fire will eat us", the bulky camera and tape recorder were museum pieces. Those heavy tins holding 10 minutes of film were replaced by tiny feather light video cassettes running 40 minutes. Shooting with lightweight digital

equipment, and a camera the size of a toaster, we could operate more swiftly and less intrusively. Instead of waiting anxiously for weeks until we were home to get the film back from the laboratories, we could view our material every evening after the day's shooting, We could locate ourselves in the bush with a hand-held GPS tracker, and contact the world via a satellite phone.

The new filming toys allowed us to record the latest chapter in Mursi's ongoing story with greater immediacy. We were shooting as a group of Belgian tourists spilled out of land cruisers to grab photos of the Mursi - startling evidence of how the people I had struggled to reach in 1974 are now being compelled to deal with the outside world. Watching them posing grudgingly for the tourist money which would help to feed their families, I reflected on how much our filming visits might have changed the Mursi.

I recalled an extraordinary scene from 20 years ago when we were able for the first time to show a group of Mursi some of the films we had been making with them. We set up a little Television in a forest clearing, powered with a car battery, and fed by a VHS cassette and video player. A Mursi man explained to the audience that they would see some people who were now dead, walking and talking. He told them that some people might be distressed , and should leave. Then I started the film we had made on that first visit, and people watched intently. When it was over, one man asked David Turton: "What's it for? You can't eat it, and you can't tie your bull up with it". It was a perfect corrective, I thought, for all of us in the self-important TV trade.

But another man who had watched the film had a more encouraging comment. "I'm glad you've done this" he said, "because now that our lives are changing so quickly, our children will be able to see how we used to live." In other words, the films have become historical documents and it's important that we find ways of making them permanently and easily available to future generations of Mursi. I hope these recordings of their lives over three decades will give something back to a people who have allowed us to share those lives. And I hope the films may also help later generations of Mursi to hold onto a sense of their identity.