

11. Looking for a cool place: the Mursi, 1890s – 1980s

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When the Mursi speak of the population movements that brought them into their present territory, and which have continued throughout this century, they describe themselves as 'looking for a cool place'. This phrase is important for the light it sheds, not only on Mursi history (in the sense of an objective record of past events) but also on the role of history (in the sense of a subjective interpretation of those events) in shaping and legitimising their response to present ecological conditions. In the first part of this chapter I give a brief account of Mursi subsistence activities, as I have observed them over the past eighteen years, and summarise their response, over that period, to the worst ecological crisis in living memory. I then trace their response to the more gradual ecological changes that have been taking place in their territory since the turn of the century, in order to place more recent events in their historical context. Finally, I show how, behind a mask of cultural and historical continuity, summed up in the phrase 'looking for a cool place', far-reaching changes have been taking place in the territorial composition of their society and in their view of themselves as a distinct group.

The 1970s: drought, war and migration

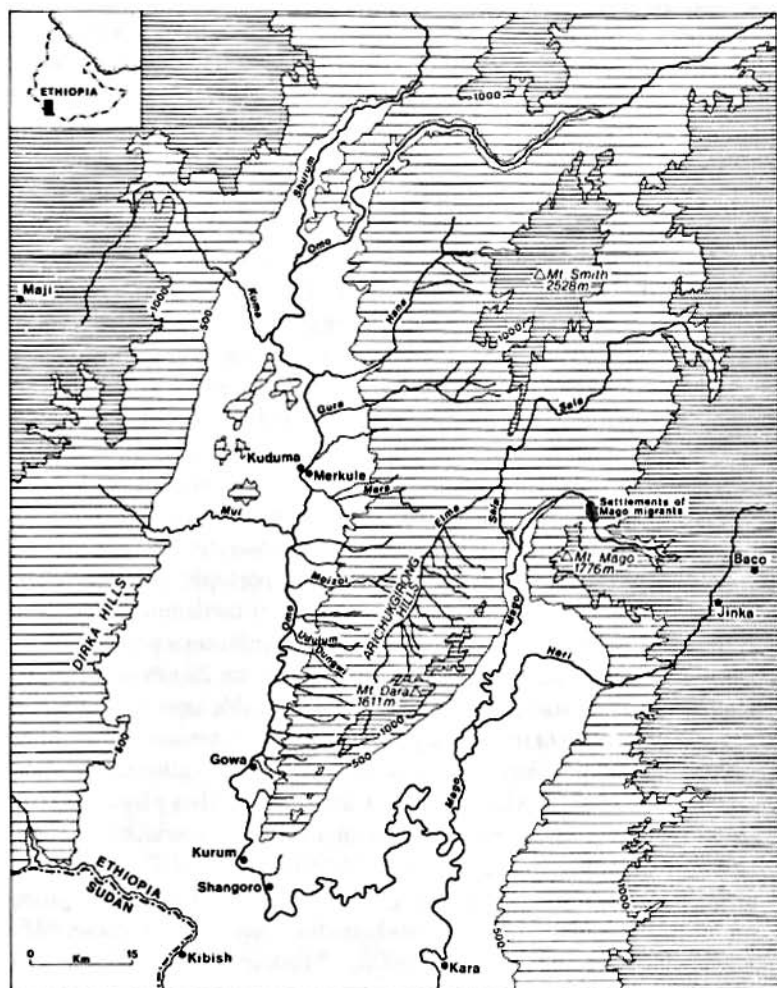
The Mursi number about 5000 and live in the Lower Omo Valley of south-western Ethiopia, about 100 km north of Lake Turkana. Their territory is in the shape of an oblong, bounded to the west and south by the River Omo, to the east by the Mago and to the north by a seasonal, westward flowing tributary of the Omo, the Mara. Their economy is based upon cultivation and cattle herding.

Their main crop is sorghum, although they also grow some maize, beans and cowpeas. Two harvests are obtained each year, one by rain-fed, shifting cultivation and one by flood-retreat cultivation. Mean annual rainfall in Mursiland is probably around 480 mm.,¹ most of the rain being concentrated into two periods, one between March and May (the primary maximum) and the other between October and December. Planting of the rain-fed crop takes place in bush clearings along the westward flowing tributaries of the Omo as soon as it is clear that the main rains have begun – in a ‘normal’ year around the middle of March. The Mursi grow a variety of sorghum which is ready for harvesting ten to twelve weeks after planting and which is therefore well adapted to the relatively short rainy season. But the onset, duration and intensity of the rains varies considerably from one year to the next, often with devastating results for the harvest.² Once cleared, a plot is planted continuously for up to six years (but ideally for no more than four), by which time there has been a significant reduction in yield, due to lowered fertility and competition from weeds.

The flood crop is planted on narrow silt berms along the banks of the Omo in September and October and harvested in December and January. Since only land which has been inundated by that year’s flood can be planted, the area available is determined by the flood level, which varies from year to year, and by the configuration of the river bank. The most extensive flooding occurs on the inner bends of meanders, but the Omo is relatively straight for most of its course in Mursiland, only beginning to meander markedly after it has turned eastwards, round the southern end of the Dara range. Flood-retreat cultivation, although providing small and variable harvests, is a most valuable complement to rain-fed cultivation, for two main reasons. Firstly, and depending on the level reached by the flood, the same plots can be cultivated year after year because their fertility is annually renewed by nutrients deposited in the flood silts. Secondly, since the Omo flood is controlled by the heavy ‘summer’ rains which fall over its highland catchment area, flood cultivation is relatively unaffected by the erratic local rainfall which makes rain-fed cultivation so uncertain. Because of this uncertainty, coupled with the limited area available for flood-retreat cultivation,

1. K. Butzer, *Recent History of an Ethiopian Delta: The Omo River and the Level of Lake Rudolf* (Chicago: 1971):26.

2. In 1969 the rains did not begin until 18 April and petered out within three weeks, leading to a total failure of the crop. In 1974 the rains began on 17 March and continued until harvest time. Seeds were washed out of the ground by heavy rain and yields were much reduced by crop pests and disease.



10 The Lower Omo Valley

cattle herding is a vital additional resource for the Mursi.

During the dry season, between October and February, cattle are kept far to the east, in the wooded grasslands which rise towards the Omo-Mago watershed and which are drained by the River Elma. The herds are then under the care of young men and boys, who live in rough, temporary camps and subsist almost entirely on milk, blood and meat. The remainder of the population, meanwhile, is at the Omo, where flood-retreat cultivation is in progress. Cattle cannot be kept for long periods at the Omo because its flanking forest and bushbelt is infested with tsetse flies and because, even when the tsetse threat diminishes, during the dry season, what little grazing land is to be found there is quickly exhausted. With the onset of the main rains, however, the population becomes more concentrated. The cattle are moved westwards and more permanent settlements are built around the head streams of the Omo's westward flowing tributaries, in the mostly dry beds of which water holes are dug for the cattle. Since these settlements are no more than an hour's walk from the rain-fed cultivation areas, the population as a whole, but especially young children, can benefit from the increased milk supply which is brought on by the rains.

It is not, however, the contribution made by pastoral products to daily subsistence that most clearly demonstrates the economic importance of cattle to the Mursi. Since their *per capita* stock wealth is only about one, they would need to increase their cattle numbers at least ten-fold in order to subsist entirely, or even mainly, on a pastoral diet.³ As it is, cattle can provide them with no more than 20 per cent of their total subsistence – not, of course, an inconsiderable amount, especially as it comes in the form of a protein supplement to a predominantly grain diet, but hardly one that reflects the overwhelming cultural and social importance of cattle in Mursi society. Cattle nevertheless play a vital role in maintaining the longterm viability of an economy which, although based primarily on cultivation, is beset by frequent crop failures. At such times they can be readily exchanged for grain among neighbouring groups, or sold in highland markets for the same purpose. The conversion of live animals into grain is, of course, a more efficient way of dealing with a food shortage than their direct consumption. As the most effective means of famine insurance available to them, the Mursi regard cattle as their last defence against starvation, a view that was

3. G. Dahl and A. Hjort, *Having Herds: Pastoral Herd Growth and Household Economy*, (Stockholm: 1976).

amply justified during the drought of the early 1970s.⁴

Between 1971 and 1973 the rains failed for three years in succession, an event which was unprecedented in living memory. The resulting famine was so severe that people could compare it only with one called *roboga*, which occurred before any of them were born and which I take to be the 'great famine' of 1888–92.⁵ How did they cope? The first answer is that many of them did not. Of a census of 367 married men I had conducted during my first visit to the Mursi, in 1970, nearly 20 per cent were dead by 1974 and one can only imagine the death-rate there must have been among children under five. The second answer is that the single most important factor which enabled them, as a group, to survive the crisis was access to grain, through market exchange, from the highlands. All manner of items were bartered or sold – rifles, agricultural implements, cattle and buffalo hides, honey, tobacco, personal ornaments and even walking sticks. But, in their own estimation, it was the ability to sell or exchange cattle which differentiated, more than anything else, those who survived from those who did not. The most telling indication both of the seriousness of the crisis and of the crucial role of cattle as famine insurance was that people even took back by force cattle they had paid in bridewealth, thereby not only divorcing themselves but also undermining a system of long term reciprocity which plays a key role in the equitable distribution of scarce resources.⁶

External relations were also in turmoil. Inter-group fighting on a large scale affected all the herding peoples of the Lower Omo during the early 1970s,⁷ the Mursi being chiefly involved in mutual cattle raiding with their northern neighbours, the Bodi. Although undoubtedly occasioned by food shortage, these raids cannot be seen as ecologically

4. In the account which follows I give the minimum information needed to support the argument later in the chapter. For more details see D. Turton, 'Response to Drought: The Mursi of Southwest Ethiopia' in J.P. Garlick and R.W.J. Keay (eds.) *Human Ecology in the Tropics*, Symposia of the Society for the Study of Human Biology, Vol.16 (London: 1977); D. Turton, 'Mursi Response to Drought: Some Lessons for Relief and Rehabilitation', *African Affairs*, 84, (1985): 331–46; D. Turton and P. Turton, 'Spontaneous Resettlement after Drought: an Ethiopian Example', *Disasters*, 8, 1984: 178–89.

5. cf. R. Pankhurst and D. Johnson in this volume.

6. See D. Turton, 'The Economics of Mursi Bridewealth: A Comparative Perspective', in J. Comaroff (ed.), *The Meaning of Marriage Payments*, (London: 1980).

7. See articles by Almagor, Tornay, Fukui, Turton and Todd in F. Fukui and D. Turton (eds.) *Warfare among East African Herders*, Senri Ethnological Studies No.3, (Osaka: 1977).

adaptive, at least in the short term, for they made matters worse in a number of ways. Cattle were made less vulnerable to raids but more vulnerable to disease by being kept on the fringes of the tsetse-infested Omo bush; agricultural activities, especially in the rain-fed cultivation areas, were severely disrupted; and people travelling to and from highland markets were regularly ambushed and killed. This was not a period of particularly intense conflict between two groups who regularly raid each other for cattle, but a breakdown in the normally peaceful relations between them which justified the term war. It was Mursi occupation of the River Mara, which dates only from the late 1920s and early 1930s, that turned out to be the underlying bone of contention. Both sides acknowledged that Mara had once been Bodi territory, though it had not been occupied by them in living memory. The war came to an end in 1975, when two peace-making ceremonies were held, one by the Mursi at Mara and the other by the Bodi at Gura, 18 km to the north. Since they were attended by representatives of both sides, these ceremonies amounted to *de jure* ratification of what was previously only the *de facto* Mursi-Bodi boundary. For there had been an earlier war between the two groups, in the late 1940s, at the end of which the Mursi held their peace-making ceremony on the River Moizoi, 20 km south of the Mara. From the Mursi point of view, then, the war of the early 1970s was ecologically adaptive, although not in relation to the crisis which probably occasioned it. Rather, it was part of a longterm process of Mursi expansion which, as I shall show later, may be seen as a response to changing conditions in the Omo valley over the past ninety years.

After some improvement during the middle years of the decade, the rains were again poor in 1977 and disastrously so in the two following years. Flood levels were also low between 1978 and 1980. Conditions were almost as bad as they had been at the beginning of the decade and, in the 1978-9 dry season, there took place an event which had been predicted to me several years before, in these words: 'if the rain deserts our country, we must do the same'. The event was a migration, by people living in the Mara area, to the unoccupied Mago Valley. They settled at the northern foot of Mt Mago, and by 1982 there were over 200 houses here, spread over approximately one square mile, and between 800 and 1000 people, or 20 per cent of the total Mursi population.

The migrants chose this site firstly, because it offered the prospect of more reliable rain-fed cultivation. Not only does it receive a somewhat better rainfall than the Omo lowlands, being about 250m higher (750m

as opposed to 500m), but there is also a wide expanse of untouched forest and bush on both banks of the Mago. The migrants have, in fact, enjoyed consistently better rain-fed crop yields than in the rest of Mursiland, with the result that, even in relatively poor years, less fortunate relatives from other parts of the country have descended upon them in search of extended hospitality and gifts of grain. In good years they have been able to sell their surplus sorghum in the weekly market in Berka, a highland village about four hours' walk away. The proximity of Berka was the second, and perhaps equal, attraction of the Mago Valley for the migrants. It is easy to see why this should be so, given the importance of market exchange in seeing them through the recent years of hunger. Living so close to the market means that, in hungry periods, they can sell small items, such as honey and firewood, and with the proceeds buy enough food to keep their families going for another week or so. The Mago migrants are the only Mursi who are in regular contact with a market centre and they have been quick to take advantage of the material benefits this entails.

For a people as culturally committed to cattle herding as the Mursi there was one serious drawback to the move: the area chosen has a higher tsetse 'challenge' than the Omo lowlands. When they first moved to the Mago, the migrants were, at least publicly, optimistic about the chances of being able to keep cattle as close to their new cultivation areas as they had been accustomed to do in the lowlands during the wet season but, by the time of my last visit to them, in August 1986, they had accepted that the risks were too great for this. They now keep their cattle in the traditional grazing areas, at least a full day's walk away, under the care of unmarried male relatives, and bring them back to the Mago only during the one or two driest months of the year, when the tsetse threat is diminished. This had led several of the original migrants, who were relatively wealthy stockowners, to return to their former cultivation areas, preferring the likelihood of poorer crop yields to, on the one hand, the certainty of serious stock losses if they kept their cattle in the Mago valley and, on the other, the almost year-round separation of their agricultural and pastoral activities. The result is that the 'Mago Mursi', who now tend to be people with few or no cattle, look set to become sedentary agriculturalists, with fewer and fewer links to the pastoral economy of the lowlands, and more and more to the peasant economy of the highlands.

The Mago migration, even more clearly than the war of the early seventies, was a response to a particularly severe ecological crisis. When looked at in the context of recent Mursi history, however, it was far

from unexpected or arbitrary. It, or something like it, would have happened anyway, even without the drought.

The historical context: response to ecological change since the 1890s

Recent ecological changes in the Lower Omo basin have all been related to a lowering in the level of Lake Turkana, due to reduced discharge from the Omo and thus to reduced rainfall over the Omo Basin. From a survey of the historical evidence (mainly the reports of travellers and explorers), Karl Butzer has concluded that, after a thirty to forty year period of rising lake levels up to 1896, there was a 'precipitous drop of 13 metres by 1908'.⁸ There followed a short lived rise of three metres around 1918, after which the downward trend continued until the mid-1950s, by which time the lake was twenty metres below its 1896 level. In the early 1960s there was a rise of four to five metres, associated with a succession of prolonged rainy seasons over the Ethiopian Plateau. Butzer comments that 'contemporary trends . . . appear to be positive'⁹ but he was writing before the drought years of the 1970s, which have presumably resulted in a renewal of 'negative trends' up to the present.

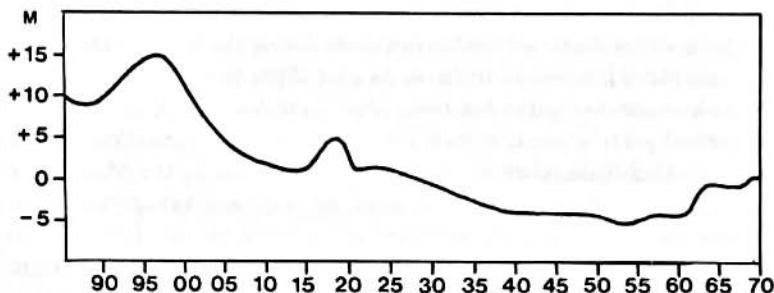


Fig. 1
Fluctuations in the level of Turkana since the 1890s.
 (Based on Butzer, 1971: 123)

8. Butzer, *Recent History of an Ethiopian Delta*: 124.

9. Butzer, *loc.cit.*

This drastic and rapid change in the level of Lake Turkana¹⁰ has had a marked impact on the ecology of the Lower Omo Basin in the space of the last two or three generations.

Most obviously, hundreds of square kilometres of land which were once submerged at the northern end of the lake have been exposed, and the area liable to annual flooding along the banks of the Omo has been reduced. The consequent drying out of land adjacent to the river has produced a transition to woody vegetation which is more advanced the further one proceeds upstream.

[the] progressive improvement in drainage favoured the development of woody vegetation, resulting in a southward advance of forest and woodland along the levee. Since there has been a greater time period for development of this woody vegetation at the northern end of this previously submerged and inundated zone, there exists along the levee and backslopes a south to north gradient of vegetational successional development.¹¹

The same process of vegetational change, associated with improved drainage, must have occurred along the Omo's westward flowing tributaries in Mursiland. Today, none of these contains surface water for more than, at most, a few weeks at a time during the wet season, but one of them, the Mara, became seasonal only in living memory. One man, who was about ten years old at the beginning of the Italian occupation (1937), could remember a goat being taken by a crocodile at a place on the Mara where it is now possible to obtain water only by digging. The lower courses of these tributaries pass through what is, today, a belt of bushland thicket¹² extending east of the Omo as far as the 500m contour. Since older informants can remember when this was open grassland, used for cattle herding, it seems likely that another factor in creating the bushbelt (apart from a reduction in ground water level) has been heavy dry season grazing which, by reducing the effectiveness of periodic burning, would have made it easier for woody plants to establish themselves. This in turn would have allowed tsetse, already

10. 'The levels of this lake have fluctuated over a range of 20 metres within the past 75 years, an amplitude exceeding that of any other world lake of natural origin'. Butzer, *Recent History*: 146.

11. C. Carr, *Pastoralism in Crisis: The Dasanetch and their Ethiopian Land*, (Chicago: 1977): 65.

12. Typical plants of the bushbelt are: *Sarcostemma*, *Euphorbia tirucali*, *Cissus quadrangularis*, *Sansevieria*, *Acacia mellifera*, *Adenium obesum* and *Plectranthus*.

present in the riverine forest of the Omo, to penetrate the wooded grassland east of the 500m contour, a process which is reported by people in their fifties and sixties to have been increasing steadily during their lifetimes. The negative impact of these ecological changes on both the agricultural and pastoral activities of the Mursi was the impetus of their territorial expansion over the past ninety years.

According to Mursi traditional history, they moved into their present territory from a range of hills, which they call Dirka, west of the Omo and south of the River Mui. Although it is impossible to say what prompted this move, it is easy to see why they should have settled on the east rather than on the west bank of the Omo. Between Dirka and the Omo there is a level grass plain, twenty to twenty-five kilometres wide and less than 500 metres in elevation, which becomes quickly waterlogged after rain but lacks even seasonal water courses. While this plain could have been used for grazing during the dry season, provided the cattle were not taken too far from the Omo, mud would have made it quite unsuitable for grazing during the rainy season. The same conditions would have been found east of the Omo, but only for about 5 kilometres, as far as the 500m contour. After this there is lighter, stoney and therefore more porous soil, as the ground rises steadily towards Mt Dara, the slopes of which are drained by numerous tributaries of the Omo and Elma. East of the Omo, then, the Mursi found a similar environment to that of the Dirka Hills, but in close proximity to a major river with opportunities for flood retreat cultivation.

The Omo was, at that time, occupied by a group of hunters and cultivators, the Kwegu, who today form a small client population among both the Mursi and Bodi¹³ and who are said to have first introduced the Mursi to cultivation. The Kwegu were in a subservient relationship with the Bodi, who occupied the present day Mursi grazing areas east of the Omo and who, in turn, had close links with communities of hill farmers who occupied higher ground in the Dara range and along the Omo-Elma watershed. These were ancestors of the Ari and/or the Dizi, who are now confined to the highlands east and west of the Omo respectively. The Mursi attacked the cattle herding Bodi, who retreated northwards, beyond the river Mara, but claim to have left the Kwegu in peace. The hill farmers, they say, 'just left'.

13. See D. Turton, 'A Problem of Domination at the Periphery: The Kwegu and the Mursi', in D. Donham and W. James (eds.), *The Imperial Marches of Southern Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology* (Cambridge: 1986): 148-72.

Having established themselves in their new territory, and in the absence of the present bushbelt, the Mursi would have been able to graze their herds along the east bank of the Omo, in close proximity to the river, for most of the year. Even if tsetse were already present in the riverine forest, the fly in question would have been *glossina fuscipes* which, in contrast to *glossina pallipides*, the thicket tsetse which infests the bushbelt today, is a poor vector of bovine trypanosomiasis. In the dry season the threat would have been particularly slight. In rainy periods it would have been necessary to move the cattle only a short distance eastwards better drained ground above the 500m contour. This is in contrast to the more extensive pattern of transhumance which the growth of the bushbelt subsequently made necessary, and which I described in the first part of the chapter.

It is impossible to say with any certainty when the Mursi first moved to the Omo, but what little evidence there is suggests that they did so between 100 and 200 years ago. At Gowa, on the left (east) bank of the Omo, there was in 1970 a large tree which was said to have been used to tie up calves when the original crossing (using a ford which has since been washed away) was made. On high ground overlooking the River Elma, at Arichukgirong, there are what appear to be the fairly recent remains of houses built by the farmers who abandoned the area on the arrival of the Mursi.¹⁴ And at the southern end of the Dara Range, not only are there clear remains of hill terracing, but there was also, in 1970, at least one dead coffee tree still standing. In any event, all that can be said with certainty, on the basis of oral testimony and external historical evidence, is that the Mursi were living on the east side of the Omo by the 1890s and it is from this point that one can begin to trace the history of their subsequent movements with some confidence. The first essential is to construct a reliable chronological framework, and this can be done by making use of the age set system.

There are two basic male age grades, basic in the sense that all males can be categorised by means of them: boys (*lusa*) and adults (*zuo*). These are subdivided into four grades of boys and three of adults, the senior grade of boys being *teru* and the junior grade of adults, *roro*. The process of physical maturation which is socially recognised by these terms is, of course, a gradual one for each individual. But social maturation is achieved suddenly, publicly and collectively by all the *teru* of a locality

14. These are circular stone platforms, about 5 to 6 metres in diameter, on which, say the Mursi, the mud floors of the houses were laid. This was to keep out surface water as it ran down the hillside after heavy rain.

through a two-day ceremony, called *nitha*.¹⁵ This not only promotes them to the *rora* grade but also forms them into an age set, a named, society-wide category of age mates. As each new set is formed, members of the immediately senior set become *bara* (elders). Each of the three main territorial sections into which the Mursi are divided, Ariholi, Gongulobibi and Dola, holds its ceremony, in that order, during the same wet season. The priority of the southern sections is said to derive from the fact that the Mursi first crossed from the west to the east side of the Omo in the south of their present territory. Combining oral history with external historical evidence it is possible to establish, with varying degrees of accuracy, the dates of the last six ceremonies, as follows:

Benna	1890-92
Geleba	1900-05
Gurtu	1910-12
Kera	1924-25
Yoiya	1935
Benna	1961

Age set ceremonies are useful historical reference points because the Mursi commonly date past events by referring to the age grade then being occupied by a particular set. They are also spatial reference points because their locations have varied in response both to short- and long-term movements of population and to long-term changes in the seasonal transhumance pattern.

The earlier Benna age set was formed either in the same year as, or during the year immediately preceding, an outbreak of rinderpest which occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century and which is associated with the famine called *roboga*. On the assumption that rinderpest reached the Mursi a little after it appeared in northern Ethiopia and the Sudan¹⁶, this would have been in 1891 or 1892. So many cattle were lost during this epidemic that virtually the whole Mursi population became dependent for survival on cultivation, hunting and fishing along the banks of the Omo and this seems to have been their

15. The name is taken from the killing of one or more oxen, which is a major feature of the ceremony. For a more detailed account of age set ceremonial see D. Turton, 'Territorial Organisation and Age among the Mursi', in P.T.W. Baxter and U. Almagor (eds.), *Age, Generation and Time: Some Features of East African Age Organisation*, (London: 1978): 9-130.

16. See R. Pankhurst and D. Johnson in this volume.

situation when they were first contacted by Europeans, in 1896. During July and August that year an Italian Geographical Society expedition, led by Vittorio Böttogo, followed the left bank of the Omo from a point approximately due west of Mt Smith to Lake Turkana.¹⁷ On 3 August, when it was about 30 km south of the Mui junction, the expedition met some people called 'Tdamoo'. By 7 August, having passed through 'village after village' and seen many dugout canoes, it was at the southwestern extremity of the Dara range. Between here and the Mago junction there was a relatively large population of 'Tdama' or 'Muu', living mainly by hunting and fishing but with small (rain-fed) plots of sorghum and beans on the river bank and 'very few goats and oxen'.¹⁸ These were clearly the Mursi, since they are known today as 'Dama' by the Bodi, their former self-name was 'Tamai' (a name they still use on ceremonial occasions) and 'Muu' is very close to their present self-name, *Mun*. But the fact that they are also described as 'expert elephant hunters', using not only spears but also poisoned arrows, and as keeping elephant tail 'trophies' in their houses suggests that there were also Kwegu here, ancestors no doubt of those who are found today at the mouth of the Mago and who are called Mugudji by their southern neighbours, the Kara.¹⁹ Before they acquired guns the Mursi certainly hunted elephants with spears, but the use of poisoned arrows and the keeping of animal tail trophies are Kwegu, not Mursi, traditions. The Mursi, however, through their patron-client link with the Kwegu,²⁰ would have controlled the sale of ivory, through a Kara village south of the Mago junction.²¹

At the time of Böttogo's visit, then, the Mursi were concentrated in the south of their present territory and were depending heavily on hunting, fishing and cultivation. It is likely that the Italians underestimated the extent of their dependence on cultivation since, this being the wet season, there would have been no evidence of flood retreat cultivation. The report that they had 'very few' livestock is obviously consistent with a recent outbreak of rinderpest (although it is likely that whatever cattle they did possess at the time would have been kept out of

17. L. Vannutelli and C. Citerni, *L'Omo: Viaggi de'Esplorazione nell' Africa Orientale*, (Milan: 1899): 308–30.

18. Vannutelli and Citerni, *L'Omo* . . . : 323.

19. J. Lydall, 'Hamer', in M.L. Bender (ed.), *The Non-Semitic Languages of Ethiopia*, Monograph No.5, Occasional Papers Series, Committee on Ethiopian Studies (East Lansing, Michigan: 1976): 393–437.

20. See D. Turton, 'A Problem of Domination . . .'

21. Vannutelli and Citerni, *L'Omo* . . . : 329.

the expedition's sight). The dominant theme in Mursi accounts of the period is the efforts that were then being made to rebuild the herds after this disastrous epidemic. Ivory was no doubt directly exchanged for cattle, although it must also have been used to obtain guns, which the Mursi began to acquire during the first decade of this century. Less valuable items than ivory were used to start a chain of conversions which ended in the acquisition of cattle. One such item was *mudani*, a local, inferior, kind of salt, which was exchanged first for coffee in highland villages, such as Berka. The coffee was then exchanged for goats among the Nyangatom, who live west of the Omo, and the goats were taken back to the highlands to be converted into cattle.

Just as they were thus laboriously rebuilding their herds after the rinderpest, they had to contend with a new threat; cattle raids by Amhara (or more properly Shewans) from the Baco highlands, which had been brought under the sway of the Ethiopian Emperor, Menelik II in 1894. Such raids, which were at least partly the result of demands for tribute and tax emanating from the top of the Imperial hierarchy, became a regular feature of Mursi life for the next forty to fifty years and were probably as important a factor as disease in preventing the steady growth of their herds. The method used was simply to collect by force, and drive away, as many cattle as possible. The response of the Mursi was to keep what animals they could out of sight of the raiders and this could best be achieved by taking them onto the right bank of the Omo. I was told of cattle being taken to drink at the Omo after dark, their mouths being tied shut on the journey to and from the river, and their tracks being carefully covered up afterwards.

During the early years of this century there were two epidemics among the human population which are said to have caused a huge number of deaths. They were both particularly virulent along the Omo, where the bulk of the population was living because of Amhara raids. The first, a tick-borne disease, occurred between 1900 and 1905 and the second, sleeping sickness, between 1909 and 1912. The appearance of sleeping sickness can be externally dated, thanks to a report by an English traveller, C.H. Stigand. On his way from Lake Turkana to Baco via the Mago Valley in 1909, Stigand was given descriptions of a disease which was new to the area and which he took to be sleeping sickness.²² His prediction that whole communities would soon be wiped out along

22. C.H. Stigand, *To Abyssinia Through an Unknown Land*, (London: 1910): 240.

the Omo is confirmed by Mursi and Nyangatom accounts.²³ It was during the sleeping sickness epidemic that the Gurtu age set was formed, the elders having decided to go ahead with the ceremonies on the grounds that, 'if the young men are to die, they should die as adults'.

The location of the Gurtu ceremonies gives us some indication that the bulk of the Mursi were still concentrated at that time in the southern half of their present territory and that they still regarded the Omo as the heart (or as they would say 'stomach') of their country. The Gongulobibi and Ariholi sections held their ceremonies on the left bank of the Omo, at Gowa, while the Dola section held its about five kilometres to the north, on the right bank. When the Kera set was formed, in 1924 or 1925, each section held its ceremony on the right bank: Gongulobibi opposite Shangoro, Ariholi opposite Kurum, and Dola opposite Gowa. (This was because of yet another incursion of Amhara from Baco, who established a base on the Mara.) Because of the Mursi practice of holding age set ceremonies at places which are historically important in relation to their migration route, it cannot be assumed that the most northerly of these ceremonies marked the northern limit of Mursi occupation at the time. It is, on the contrary, reasonable to assume that a 'pioneering' northward movement had been going on for some years before 1925, in search of new rain-fed cultivation areas along the Omo's westward flowing tributaries. What can be said for certain is that it was not until after the Kera set and before the Yoiya set had been formed (between 1925 and 1935) that members of the Dola section began to make use of the Mara Valley for rain-fed cultivation. Up to that time the most northerly of the Omo's westward flowing tributaries they had used for this purpose was the Moizoi, which is twenty kilometres south of the Mara. What factors lay behind this northward movement?

The drastic lowering in the level of Lake Turkana which, by 1935, had fallen about seventeen metres from its 1896 level, would have resulted in a progressive deterioration of flood-retreat harvests – progressive not only in time, but also in an upstream direction. Meanwhile, the Omo was becoming a less attractive area for rain-fed cultivation, not so much because of a reduction in the area of untouched riverine forest, although this may have been a factor, as because the growth of bushland thicket (and consequently of the tsetse population)

23. S. Tornay, 'The Omo Murle Enigma', in M.L. Bender (ed.), *Peoples and Cultures of the Ethio-Sudan Borderlands*, Monograph No. 10, Committee on North East African Studies (East Lansing, Michigan: 1981): 33–60.

along its banks made it increasingly difficult to keep cattle in close proximity to the cultivation areas. New rain-fed cultivation areas were therefore sought farther to the east, along the Omo's westward flowing tributaries, around the headstreams of which cattle could be kept throughout the wet season. In the 1920s and 1930s the Mara, unlike all the tributaries to the south of it, was a permanent river, flowing through a substantial area of untouched forest. It marked the line beyond which the Bodi had retreated when the Mursi crossed to the east side of the Omo a hundred or more years earlier.

This movement of rain-fed cultivation eastwards from the Omo and northwards to Mara was accompanied by a new pattern of seasonal grazing movements. Not only were cattle now kept fifteen to twenty kilometres west of the Omo during the wet season but, during the dry season, they were taken not to the Omo but eastwards to the Elma Valley. This was because the growth of the bush-belt was making it increasingly difficult to keep cattle at the Omo, even during the dry season, due to the abundance of tsetse and the shortage of grazing. If the 500m contour line is taken as the eastern limit of the bushbelt, it can be seen from Figure 1 that its width increases northwards. Thus it was the members of the 'pioneering' Dola section who would have first felt the need to adopt a new pattern of transhumance, one which made the wooded grassland east of the Omo (which the Mursi call Mi), rather than the Omo itself, the focus of their pastoral activities and wet season settlement. The location of the Yoiya age set ceremonies, held in 1935, reflects this change in occupation and transhumance, affecting particularly the Dola section. The Gongulobibi and Ariholi ceremonies were held at the same places on the Omo as they had been held in 1924-25, although on the left bank, while the Dola ceremony was held at Ngurug, thirteen kilometres east of the Omo and seven kilometres south of the Mara.

When, in 1937, Italian forces occupied Baco and Maji, the immediate impact on the Mursi was that they were raided for cattle by a band of Ethiopian patriots, under the leadership of Alamaiyu Abajigsa, who had left Baco when the Italians arrived and established a base in the Mago Valley. In December an Italian patrol from Maji arrived at the Omo, just north of the Mui junction and in the following year the Italians established a post at Kurum. Partly because they had lost a large number of cattle in the Alamaiyu raid, and partly because of fighting between the patriots and Italians south of Kurum, increasing use was made at this time of flood land north of the Mui junction, which had previously been occupied mainly by Kwegu, as far north as the

southernmost Bodi cultivation area on the Omo, Merkule. It may be that this northward pressure on flood land was the immediate cause of a war with the Bodi that broke out in the late 1940s, after the Italians had left the area (1941), but which had been made inevitable by Mursi occupation of Mara about twenty years earlier. During the war the Mursi abandoned Mara, retreating as far south as Moizoi. Peace was made in 1951, the Mursi and Bodi ceremonies being held at Moizoi and Gura respectively. This fixed the *de jure* boundary of the Mursi well south of Mara, upon which their hold was therefore still tenuous, at least in a legal sense. In the 1951–2 dry season they returned for flood retreat cultivation, not to Merkule but to Kuduma, on the opposite bank where, because of a change in the Omo channel, the bulk of floodland was now to be found. Kuduma now became an exclusively Mursi cultivation area, while the Bodi were confined to the much smaller site at Merkule. In the next wet season (1952) the Mursi re-occupied their rain-fed cultivation areas along the Mara.

Two points stand out about the formation of the next and most recent age set, the later Benna, in 1961. Firstly, each set held its ceremony at Mi, Gongulobibi and Ariholi on the Dungwi and Undulum rivers respectively, and Dola on the Moizoi. This was because the pattern of seasonal movements pioneered by the Dola section in the 1920s and 1930s had become general by 1961. The eastern grassland was now, for all three sections, the focus of pastoral activity throughout the year and of social life in the wet season. As the Mursi put it, Mi, and not the Omo, was now 'home' (*or*). The second point that stands out about the 1961 ceremonies is that they came twenty-six years after the Yoiya set had been formed – or over twice the average interval between earlier sets. No set has been formed since 1961, despite much talk over the past few years about the pressing need to do so. I have suggested elsewhere, and there is unfortunately no space to summarise the argument and bring it up to date here, that the lengthening of age set intervals is related to a growing 'tension' or 'opposition' between overall Mursi identity and the new local identities which have been generated through territorial expansion.²⁴

The spatial context: new sections, new identities

The events of the past seventeen years can now be seen in their historical context. The 1971–75 war with the Bodi, although sparked by drought

24. D. Turton, 'Territorial Organisation ...'

and famine, was the fourth and final stage in Mursi consolidation of their hold over Mara. The first stage was achieved around 200 years ago when they first crossed the Omo and the Bodi retreated north of the Mara. The second stage came when, having, as it were, climbed northwards, from one Omo tributary to another, they began to cultivate along the Mara in the late 1920s and early 1930s. They were now making use of the last area of unoccupied country that their initial occupation of the Omo had opened up ahead of them; they were face to face with the Bodi. The third stage came with their reoccupation of Mara, after their earlier war with the Bodi, in 1952. Because, after the war, the Mursi held their peacemaking ceremony on the Moizoi, this river and not the Mara, became their *de jure* northern boundary. It took another twenty years of *de facto* occupation and another war with the Bodi before their occupation of Mara became legally ratified. This, the fourth stage, was achieved through the 1971–75 war, during which the Mursi continued to cultivate at Mara and after which held their peacemaking ceremony there.

Their next move, sideways, to the Mago Valley, although clearly a response to the drought and famine of the 1970s, bears all the hallmarks of the earlier move to the Mara, including previous (but much more recent) occupation by the Bodi. In August 1896, the Böttego expedition, having made a diversion up the right bank of the Mago to locate a suitable crossing place, found several 'Tumuru' villages on the left bank, northwest of Mt Mago.²⁵ *Tumura* is the present Mursi name for the Bodi. A year earlier, Arthur Donaldson Smith, an American explorer, had been in approximately the same part of the Mago Valley and reported the presence of a people calling themselves 'Mela'.²⁶ This is the present section name of the Bodi who live along the Gura and Hana rivers.²⁷ The Mago migrants acknowledge that the area in which they are now living was once occupied by the Bodi. Indeed, there are still many signs of them, including grinding and sharpening stones, broken pots and graves. They say the Bodi left the area because of sleeping sickness (probably, therefore, around 1910) and that it had remained unoccupied since then. Like the Mara in the 1920s, therefore, the Mago was a permanent river which offered excellent prospects for cultivation,

25. Vannutelli and Citerni, *L'Omo* . . . : 327.

26. A.D. Smith, 'Expedition through Somalia to Lake Rudolf', *Geographical Journal*, 8, 1896: 221–39.

27. K. Fukui, 'The Religious and Kinship Ideology of Military Expansion among the Bodi (Mela)', paper presented at the International Conference on Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, 1984.

its flanking forest having remained untouched for at least seventy years. It even shared with the Mara its major drawback: the presence of tsetse flies. The migrants often point out that the tsetse challenge at Mara weakened significantly once cultivation areas began to be cleared along its banks, a process which they hope, optimistically, will repeat itself at the Mago.

By the 1970s, the Mara had become a dry river bed for all but a week or two during the rains, there was no untouched forest left along its banks and crop yields were suffering from the too continuous use of plots – namely for six years or more at a time. It follows that the drought of those years, unprecedented though it was in its severity, merely accentuated a problem that was already present and which would, in due course, have dictated a similar solution to that which was adopted by the Mago migrants in 1979. As with the earlier move to the Mara, by moving to the Mago the migrants were not only gaining better crop yields for themselves but they were also relieving pressure on cultivable land in the area from which they had moved and helping to diversify the resource base of those who remained there. For the grain surpluses they have produced over the past few years have provided their less fortunate relatives elsewhere in Mursiland with an additional potential source of grain to see them through periods of hunger. The Mago migration was not, then, a sudden or arbitrary response to a particularly severe ecological crisis, but part of a continuing effort to solve, by well tried means, a recurrent problem: how to keep a satisfactory balance between available resources and population numbers. And yet, despite the historical continuities that exist between the Mago migration and earlier population movements, there are, as I hinted earlier, reasons to think that it will lead to radical change for the way of life and ethnic identity of the migrants. This again is a manifestation, even if an especially clear one, of a process that has been going on throughout this century.

It has particularly affected the Dola section, which has become the largest, in terms both of the size and geographical dispersal of its population. In the 1970s Dola was divided into three 'subsections', named, from south to north, Biogolokare, Mako and Mara. Although these were technically subsections, each was comparable in the size and seasonal movements of its population to the two southern sections and I therefore use this term for all of them. The relationship between the areas of flood retreat cultivation and areas of wet season settlement used by each section in the 1970s is shown in Figure 2. Since then a new Dola section has been formed, following the occupation of the Mago Valley by people from Mara. The new section is called Mako, which is the

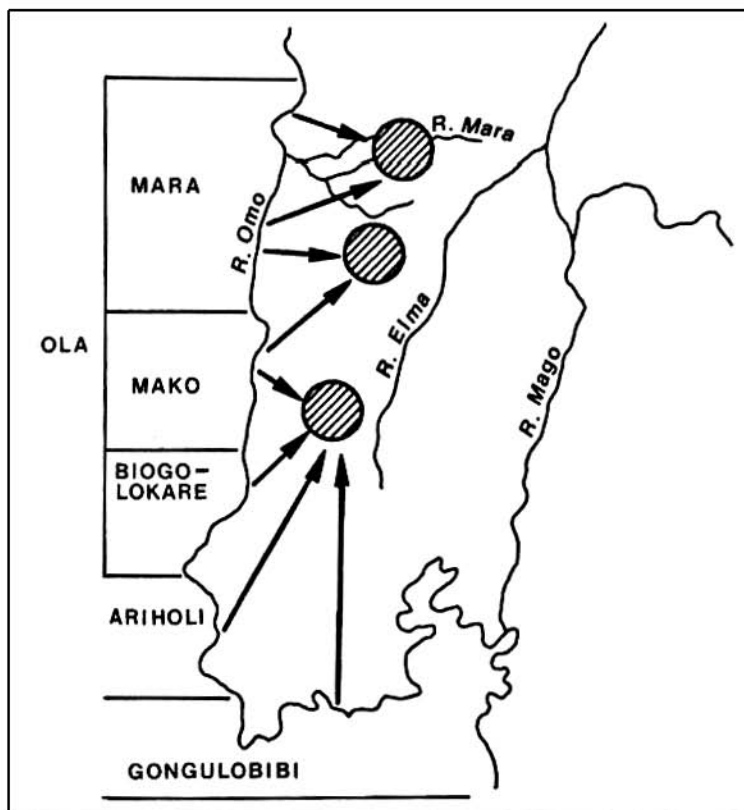


Fig. 2 Territorial sections and the relationship between areas of flood retreat cultivation and wet season settlement in the 1970s.

Mursi name of the Mago. I shall call it the Mago section to distinguish it from the other Mako section, which takes its name from one of the headstreams of the River Moizoi. Biogolokare territory is regarded as the Dola 'homeland', from where a pioneering northward movement has led to the 'replication'²⁸ of the Mako, Mara and Mago sections in that order. Mara was, before 1979, the largest of all the sections, which implies a continuing drift of population towards the north as previously unoccupied territory is taken over by the pioneers. On the basis of present evidence, which there is not space to include here, this occurs mainly through intersection marriages which result in a demographic shift from south to north, in the direction of improved (more diversified) ecological resources. Nor is this movement likely to be fed entirely from within Mursiland; intermarriage between Mursi and Chai, who speak the same language as the Mursi and live west of the Omo and south of Maji, has certainly led to a new flow of population to the Mursi. This has been particularly evident over the past ten years, during which the Chai have been even worse affected by drought than the Mursi.

As new sections have been created, the conceptual unity implied by the term Dola has become increasingly at variance with economic and political realities. The Biogolokare section, for example, has much more in common, in terms of economic cooperation and public decision making, with Ariholi and Gongulobibi, with whom it shares wet season cultivation and grazing areas, than it does with Mara. The resulting tension or opposition between Dola identity on the one hand and the separate activities and interests of its constituent units on the other is reflected in the changing nomenclature of sections. Ariholi ('white ox'), Gongulobibi ('big canoes') and Dola (derivation uncertain) date from the original occupation of the Omo. The name Biogolokare has come into use only during the past thirty or forty years. Although I am not sure of its derivation, the significant point is that, like the older names, and unlike Mara, Mako and Mago, it does not refer to a particular locality. It seems that, before the name Biogolokare was coined, distinctions within the Dola section were made by reference to a particular river or place. A person would say, for example, 'I slept last night with the Dola of such and such a river'. By the 1970s Mako and Mara were not only, like Biogolokare, the names of clearly identified sections, but these sections too were beginning to acquire 'nicknames'. As territorial units become fully established, then, they acquire a new kind of identity, one that is not seen as anchored to, or derived from, a

28. N. Dyson-Hudson, *Karimjong Politics* (Oxford: 1966): 258–70.

particular locality. The proliferation of such names within the Dola section was frequently commented on by speakers in public meetings as a cause for concern, since it indicated a falling away from what was seen as the historical unity of the Mursi. The clearest example of opposition between an historically-based ideology of unity and present-day realities is provided by the most recent section, Mago.

When they moved to the Mago Valley the migrants knew that its chief drawback was the high tsetse challenge. By 1986 they had been forced to admit at least temporary defeat in their effort to maintain the same geographical proximity between agricultural and pastoral activities in the Mago Valley as was possible in the Omo lowlands. The market is becoming for them, not just an occasional resource in times of real hardship, but a constant factor in their subsistence calculations. It seems only a matter of time before a new ethnic boundary emerges between the 'agricultural' or 'peasantised' Mursi of the Mago valley and the 'agropastoral' Mursi of the Omo lowlands. And yet the migrants do not see their move as being in any way revolutionary. They liken it explicitly to the occupation by people of their parents' generation of the Mara Valley. They see themselves, like those earlier pioneers (and as the latter saw themselves in relation to yet earlier ones), 'domesticating' the 'wilderness', clearing the forests and making the grasslands fit for cattle herding.

In thus appealing to historical precedent to legitimise their move, the migrants ignore two crucial facts: that they are facing a more formidable tsetse challenge than was faced by their predecessors in the Mara Valley and that they have *deliberately* placed themselves within the 'catchment' of a market centre. These facts, and their disturbing implications for the way of life and ethnic identity of the migrants, are brushed aside with the help of a selective and partial memory of past events. History, in the sense of a subjective interpretation of the past, is used to make publicly acceptable – and thereby possible – behaviour which is a rational response to new ecological conditions and economic opportunities, but which flies in the face of fundamental traditional values: the historical unity of the Mursi and their cultural commitment to a pastoral way of life.