

Reflections on the lip-plates of Mursi women as a source of stigma and self-esteem

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Introduction

Mursi women are famous for the wooden and clay lip-plates with which they decorate their lower lips, yet, to the informed and uninformed observer, the specific layers of meanings and kinds of information that they communicate are poorly understood¹. Building from initial observations and conversations during my first phase of field research among the Mursi, between May and August 2004, I will begin by discussing why most Mursi women adorn themselves with lip-plates, and what it is about the objects themselves that appear to hold such significance for the Mursi. Using individuals' perspectives as a source of analysis and understanding, I will also explore how the lip-plate, while subject to internally and externally conceived stigmas, continues to function as a proud symbol of Mursi identity. I conclude with one narrative that reveals the value of the lip-plate within a discourse of female strength and self-esteem.

Orientations

In December 2003, when I arrived in Ethiopia to begin doctoral field research, I expected to do a study on the processes of cultural change among the Mursi, a pastoral people who live in southwest Ethiopia, between the Omo River and its tributary the Mago River. In particular, I was interested in the question of how cultural contact with the Ethiopian state and administrators as well as missionaries, tourists, photographers, filmmakers, NGOs and neighboring ethnic groups, had managed to influence Mursi culture and everyday life. How were these transhumant cattle herders and cultivators coming to terms with the contemporary changes that were transforming their existence? These questions seemed relevant for several reasons.

Since the early 1980s there has been a northward migration of Mursi into the Mago valley (Turton 1984; 1985). David Turton, the first and only anthropologist to have traced and profoundly shaped Mursi ethnography,

explains this migration as a strategy for surviving the vicissitudes of drought and famine².

The Mago valley offered excellent prospects for both flood-retreat and rain-fed cultivation. Another very important attraction of the area was that it was only a few hours walk from the nearest settlement and market villages of a group of highland farmers, the Aari. By moving to the Mago, the Mursi could therefore improve their access to market exchange, which has become for them, as for other drought affected populations in Africa since the 1970s, a vital means of surviving periods of hunger (Turton 2004).

Consequently, the Mursi have been in increasingly close contact with the 'modern world', which, in turn, has affected their own view of the world, and their place within it. As Turton succinctly states:

Thirty years ago, the Mursi I knew still saw themselves as occupying a central position in relation to the outside world, not only geographically, but also morally. That is, they saw the norms and values which gave meaning and purpose to their lives and to their own and their children's future, as springing from, or being located in, the physical space they occupied. They were in this sense at the physical and moral centre of the world. Over the years, and especially since the regular arrival of car-loads of tourists, they have come to realise that the centre which they once saw themselves inhabiting has, as it were, slipped away from them (Turton 2004: 8).

In my own research I would like to substantiate Turton's claim that the Mursi world-view has been turned on its head by exploring how the Mursi themselves view these changes and their influence on the meanings and lived realities of contemporary life³. In what ways are the Mursi working to carve out a sense of dignity and self-respect for themselves in a world of change? How do the Mursi living in Makki, for example, where I began my fieldwork, wish to express and maintain forms of cultural identity against political, religious, and economic onslaughts? How do their southern neighbors, who are not yet faced with the same degree of social, economic and political transformation, view the Mursi in the north? What image do the Mursi have of themselves and how is it changing as a result of cultural contact?

Being in the field

As I reflect on the conditions in which I have been living and working, I discover that the questions that mattered to me in the beginning of my fieldwork are not necessarily the questions that matter to the Mursi, especially those women with whom I have been living. For example, when looking at photographs and asking Mursi women about the impact of

tourism on their lives, they are not only concerned with the number of Ethiopian Birr they should receive for having such a photo taken, but also with what will happen to the photo of the married woman with a lip-plate should her husband die. It is after sitting together with Mursi women as they prepare lip-plates to sell to tourists, or hearing my host mother refer to her daughter-in-law as a *Ngidimi* (or *Kwegu*)⁴ for not having her lip cut, and how much more prone her calves are to disease than her daughter's who has her lip cut, that I have found the focus of my research shifting. I find myself becoming more and more interested in the way in which the women comment on and connect their dangling lips to everything from aesthetics and ethnicity to a world of expanding capitalism and change.

On 28 June 2004 I wrote in my field journal:

The women are busy making lip-plates to sell when we go to Jinka. Nga Tui keeps asking me for lip balm, as her bottom lip has become cracked and chapped since she started wearing her lip-plate again. She told me that this way it will be more comfortable to wear when we are in Jinka, when the tourists come. I am reminded of the way in which I used to wear three-inch stilettos around the house a day before a dance competition to get used to the pulsating pain of stretched arches. In the evening when we sat around the campfire, I fashioned a pair out of kindling, duct-taping the wood to the bottom of my Birkenstocks™. The women laughed as I walked around the fire. I also laughed reminiscing about the way in which Richelle [my sister] and I used to do the same thing only with crushed aluminium pop cans on our feet – they made the same tapping sound as our mother's high-heels. This is no different from the way little Nga Gulu, who is maybe six years old, wears a bent branch in her mouth with a leaf on top to make it look like a lip-plate when she plays house.

I attempted in the best Mursi that I could to explain that wearing stilettos to a dance was no different from the way in which an unmarried Mursi girl might 'strut her stuff' wearing a three-inch lip-plate during a *donga* stick fight.

Bi Kalumi [my host mother] was teasing me about getting my lip cut and mimicking the way in which a girl should walk while wearing it: her head held high, her chin swaying back and forth in a very subtle, sensual manner. Though she has long since thrown her lip-plate away [her husband died over a decade ago], she still emphasizes its absence by saying, "*Dbes, dbes, dbes!*" [The sound produced by women as they walk with lip-plates].

The Mursi ask questions about increased tourism in South Omo and recent government resettlement schemes⁵; they also express great interest in why missionaries in Makki are discouraging polygamous marriage, and how such activities are influencing their lives. But, most of all, they are eager to discuss the ways in which they can respond to and resist some of these changes. The practice of cutting and stretching one's lip, or choosing not to, is one example of how Mursi women play into the construction of Mursi identity and self-esteem in a changing world.

The lip-plate

When a Mursi girl has reached puberty, she will have her lip cut and a small wooden stick inserted, giving her a new identity. She becomes a *bansanai*, an age-set in Mursi that indicates a girl's passage from girlhood to womanhood. Once her lip has been cut and stretched over a one year period by inserting bigger and bigger wooden plugs, and, then increasingly larger lip-plates made of either clay (*dbebinya*) or wood (*kiyo*), she is defined as being sexually mature. Tied tightly to fertility and eligibility for marriage, the lip-plate signifies womanhood.

The size and type of lip-plates are not only to do with the personal tastes and priorities of specific individuals, but with the size of the lip itself. Some girls' lips will simply not withstand the long period of stretching, and, for fear of it tearing, a pubescent girl may either choose not to cut her lip at all, or to stretch it to fit a small clay lip-plate. There is some variation in the shape, style and design of lip-plates. The four main kinds of clay lip-plates are: red (*dbebi a golonya*), reddish brown (*dbebi a luluma*), black (*dbebi a korra*) and a natural clay color or 'white' (*dbebi a holla*). The red lip-plates are made by placing them in hot coals and covering them with the sweet smelling bark of the *gongui* tree. The 'white' lip-plates are fired, but not rubbed as the black ones are with grass (*linnui*) or burned *lomay*, a medicinal plant also applied to wounds (such as pierced ears, cicatrization marks, and cut lips).

Wooden lip-plates (*burgui*), typically made only by men, are said to be the largest and most beautiful lip-plates worn by unmarried Mursi girls and women. Although such lip-plates are seldom seen among the northern Mursi (it is reported that only two girls from Makki wear them today), girls in the south frequently wear them still. Many girls today refer to the wooden lip-plates as somewhat old-fashioned and no longer as popular as the clay lip-plates, which are often polished with milk, grass, metal

bracelets and/or crushed pumpkin seeds and decorated with different designs.

To what extent the size and shape, as well as the specific aesthetic intentions, have changed over time has yet to be fully determined⁶. David Turton argues that the size of the lip-plate has as little to do with claims that it was historically a way of making women less attractive to slave traders, as it does with the amount of bridewealth received⁷.

This 'explanation' of the lip-plate, as a form of 'disfigurement', tells us more about the assumption and values of those who find it persuasive than it does about the practice which it is supposed to explain. One obvious problem with it, is that lip-plates are unique neither to Africa, nor to women. Amongst the Kayapo of Brazil, for example, senior men wear "a saucer-like disc some six centimetres across" (Turner 1980: 115) in the lower lip. (Turton 2004: 4)

Turton argues that the slave trade theory is false especially since the Mursi themselves have never heard of such a story. He also states elsewhere that "bridewealth consists, ideally, of thirty-eight head of cattle" (Turton 1980: 1) and is often agreed upon before

a girl has her lip cut, lending support to his assertion that the lip-plate therefore does not determine the amount of bridewealth. However, it does remain possible that there is an indirect link between the lip-plate and bridewealth. Though it is unlikely that the size of a girl's lip-plate would directly result in an increase in the number of cattle given as a bridewealth, it might give the family more negotiating power when setting the amount and timing of the bridewealth. For example, if two men are competing for a girl, especially one with a beautifully stretched lip and long earlobes, the suitor who can pay the most cattle up front is more likely to be the lucky candidate.

More important, however, is the symbolic value of the lip-plate. A girl who does not wear her lip-plate when she is expected to, is considered *karkarre*, or lazy. Though it rarely happens, this could cause her family to lose some of the agreed upon cattle if she were not to act according to the expectations of her husband-to-be. Oli Lori, the oldest brother of five, talks about what is expected of his younger sister:

If Nga Tui was not to wear her lip-plate before [she was married], I would whip her as would our mother. If I were to call her: "Nga Tui, come here! Put in your lip-plate and bring me some water. If she didn't put it in I would hit her and mother would hit her. Later, when she is given to her husband, if she does not put in her lip-plate, her husband will hit her. We teach her how to behave for when she goes to her husband (personal communication with Oli Lori Haba Korro, Makki, 27 May 2004).

Another brother with four sisters explains how he is the first to scold his younger sister, who has already been promised to someone and whose bridewealth has been agreed upon, for being lazy or for not wearing her lip-plate when she is expected to:

If she is sleeping, or playing sick when guests come and she doesn't put in her lip-plate, I will yell at her and say: "The people will only give you 25 cows, not 30 if you are lazy like this!" (personal communication with Ba Tui Dhedhep, Jinka, 27 November 2004)

The extent to which such behavior could lead to a lower amount of bridewealth has yet to be confirmed. Many Mursi men have explained that such behavior is more likely to result in some of the bridewealth being returned to the husband, though rarely does it actually happen. As Oli Sirali explained while sitting in Bongo one afternoon, shortly after his brother's marriage negotiations⁸:

If for example a husband paid 35 or 36 cows and his wife is very lazy, he might become very angry and go to her family and demand that they return some cattle. He will complain and say: "Your daughter is very lazy, she doesn't work well. I want three cows back!" It could be 3 or 2 or 1, I don't know; this doesn't happen very often (Oli Sirali Oli Bhui, Bongo, 27 December 2004).

Lip-plates are more frequently worn by unmarried women and newly wed women than by married women with children. They are generally worn on four main occasions: when serving men food; during important ritual events (like weddings); at *donga* duelling competitions (or as spectators at *ula* fights)⁹; and at dances. Unmarried girls, especially those with large lip-plates, might wear them whenever they are in public (e.g. when fetching water or visiting friends). Typically brides will live with their mothers during their first year of marriage in order for the lip to become fully healed before she shares a cowhide (i.e. bed) with her husband. She will wear her lip-plate during the first few years of marriage, but, as the years go on, she will insert her lip-plate less and less frequently when serving her husband and his guests food, or attending harvest celebrations, for example. Younger, married women may still choose to wear the lip-plate during special occasions, like *donga* stick fights and dances, but older married women hardly ever wear the lip-plate, even if their husbands are still alive¹⁰.

The lip-plate serves to remind people of a woman's commitment to her culture, and above all to her husband¹¹. If the husband dies, the lip-plate is

thrown away and should never be worn again. Even if a woman is taken in by one of her deceased husband's brothers, it is unlikely that she will wear a lip-plate unless she is very young and without children. Similarly, if a close relative dies, such as a brother, a woman will not wear her lip-plate for many months or until her friends go to her to discuss and talk about the death, and to tell her that it is time that she stop mourning (personal communication with Oli Sirali Oli Bhui, Bongo, 27 December 2004). Only when her friends invite her to the *donga* can she adorn herself again (e.g. wear her bracelets, lip-plate and shave her head). Despite taboos associated with *not* wearing the lip-plate, it is considered socially acceptable, for example, for a widow to wear a lip-plate to make money by posing for photographs taken by tourists.

While lip-plates are primarily a form of aesthetic expression, there are also issues of strength and weakness associated with them. For example, a woman who has not had her lip cut or does not wear her lip-plate in certain situations becomes more vulnerable in the presence of men. Mursi women and men often refer to her as being lazy and as someone who does things in a hasty and clumsy manner, especially in the presence of men. A woman who has chosen not to have her lip cut is said, for example, to be one who will rush to set down her husband's *garchu* (basket used for carrying sorghum porridge), or *kedem* (gourd with either coffee, sour milk or boiled leaves) because she feels uncomfortable and self-conscious around men. In short, she lacks the graces associated with womanhood, namely, to be calm, quiet, hard working, and above all, proud¹². As an elderly Mursi woman explains:

If she takes food, she will feel ashamed and afraid of the men. She will walk hurriedly, since she has no lip [plate]. She will go quickly to put the food down and will not greet anyone. If she had a lip [plate] she would walk slowly, she would walk like this (swaying her chin from side to side), '*dbes, dbes, dbes!*' She would set the food down slowly, her long earlobes saying '*bbedek, bbedek, bbedek!*' Oli Lori [her son], he chose to marry a girl who only has *lalanga* [rings worn in her stretched earlobes]. She always walks quickly because she is ashamed (Disc 1.4, Bi Kalumi Haba Korro, Makki, 27 May 2004).

Similarly, a woman who has had her lip cut is said to have healthier cows and therefore more milk than a woman without a lip-plate. Bi Kalumi goes on to explain, matter-of-factly, how her daughter-in-law lacks the same grace when she milks her cows as when she rushes to serve her husband and his guests food.

When the mother returns and the calf is released from its pen and given to its mother, she should wait until the udder is warm and full of milk. But Nya Besse does not have her lip cut. She always rushes, '*dbel, dbel, dbel!*' and does not leave enough time before the calf is given milk. She does not take time to first stretch and adjust her lip, and put in her lip-plate. She milks immediately and so the calf is always thin. If she has her lip cut, the calf is always big and fat. She will wait for the udder to become warm before she unties it and takes it to its mother. This way it will not become thin. She can tie the calf back up and still get milk from the mother. That's what I want to say (Disc 1.4, Bi Kalumi Haba Korro, Makki, 27 May 2004).

Issues of strength and weakness structure the Mursi woman's life and the passage from girlhood to womanhood, whether this is reflected in the way she brings food to her husband or in the health of her calves. Someone who has had her lip cut is considered to be able to walk tall and proud. She will not feel the same degree of self-consciousness in the presence of men as someone without a lip-plate. Failure to choose the lip-plate represents a breach in expectations regarding how a Mursi woman should behave. When discussing what would happen if a young woman were to serve her husband and his guests coffee, sorghum, or milk without wearing her lip-plate, for instance, the reply is almost always: *Kadakto!* (to hit). In other words, such inappropriate behavior may result in the woman being hit (typically with a whip) by her husband once his guests have gone¹³. Thus, a woman who does not wear her lip-plate when she is expected to is more prone to reproof and subject to scrutiny by men and women.

To what extent informal and formal social controls are played out when breaking the rules associated with wearing a lip-plate or choosing against having one's lip cut and stretched is still not clear and will require further research. The following conversation, however, of a mother-in-law talking about her daughter-in-law (while in the presence of several women and men, including the woman's husband) illustrates that gossip may be one form of informal social control.

She cannot be proud of her tallness. She is short like a warthog. She is not following the traditions of our culture and sometimes her cows will die because she is quick to take all of the milk. If she doesn't wear a lip-plate she is like a Ngidini [Kwegu]. Nobody will want to marry her. If she wears her lip-plate, wherever she goes, people will pay attention to her. Even if my daughter's lip shrinks [i.e. she wears a small lip-plate],

she can still walk proud when she takes food [to her husband]. *'Dbes, dbes, dbes,'* that is my daughter! (Disc 1.4, Bi Kalumi, Makki, May 27, 2004).

Many women, at least in the Makki area, have told me that allowing one's lip to shrink (that is, no longer stretching it with a large lip-plate, or by inserting a small lip-plate), or choosing not to cut it in the first place, is their way of becoming modern. The younger generation is especially aware that the lip-plate is viewed as a sign of backwardness by the state¹⁴. Others, especially older women and men, as well as those exposed to the economic gains of tourism, will argue that losing the lip-plate is equated with losing one's ethnic identity. Indeed the lip-plate serves as both a major component of one's sense of pride and identity in the world at the same time as it mediates being on the periphery of the public world. This is evident in the following encounter between two Mursi women. Both are married with children and both have had their lips cut, but only one of them wishes to continue wearing her lip-plate. The other no longer sees her sense of 'self' as strongly rooted in this aesthetic form of expression.

Mursi women in a merging world

SL: Legessa says that she no longer wants a [stretched] lip.

L: That's right, I really don't want it!

SL: Barmille says that a [stretched] lip is nice. Why is this?

L: Yes, she can say what she wants and I can say what I want.

L: I really don't want mine; I want to be like an Amhara.

B: That's not what I want. (*Both begin to laugh*).

L: I made up my mind that I didn't want the [stretched] lip. If I were to go to Jinka tomorrow, I would have my lip sewn back and would learn how to speak the language of the Amhara. But you say, "I am Mursi!"

B: Yes, I am Mursi! I want a [stretched] lip, so that I can put in a lip-plate, lip-plate, lip-plate. If tourists come they will take photos, photos, photos, photos, like that. Now Legessa says, "I want my lip to shrink and I want to learn to speak Amharic." Why shrink her lip? She's Mursi? Yes, she's a Mursi.

L: That's not what I want! That's not what I want! I only want to learn, to learn Amharic and the [language of] foreigner's, both! This is what I told Shauna.

B: Is this good Shauna?

SL: I don't know.

B: You don't know?

B: Legessa, she's a liar.

L: I know [what I am saying]! I am a child of the state [a citizen]. Today Shauna asked: "Why isn't your lip stretched, why aren't you putting in your lip-plate?" I want to learn. If I go to Jinka, I won't stretch my lip, and, if tomorrow, I become a child of the state, I will not stretch my lip, or wear skins, only clothes. That's what I have to say.

B: That's what you say, but I will stretch my lips, stretch my ears and the tourists will come. Even if my lip and ears are stretched more than yours, we are no different; I am also a child of the state, like you. I can also learn Amharic even if I have a long dangling lip.

L: Yes, fine. You have your way of looking at it and I have mine. I want it to shrink, to become small, that's what I have to say. I really don't want [a stretched lip], I don't want skins; today, I only want to wear clothes. We can still keep on having children without stretching our ears, without stretching our lips. That's how it is. I don't want to.

B: Fine, but I will always have a stretched lip; the lip will be stretched, the ears will be stretched and when the tourists come, they will shoot [their cameras], shoot, shoot [at me]. Now if Legessa wants to shrink her lip and become a student, let her go and become a citizen of the state, let her sew her lip and let her ears become short. Go and become like them if you want, go without [this] (*pulling on her lip*); that's your choice. My choice is to make my lip long.

L: Keep quiet and listen! I don't want a big stretched lip. If, later on, Shauna says, "Let's go to Arba Minch" and you were to put in your lip-plate and walk into a big hotel together, where everyone is eating, the people will ask, (*running her finger down her chin*) "What kind of person is this with drool!" The people will look at you and talk badly about you. I don't want this.

B: You might want to leave, but if I go with my lip [plate] to Addis Ababa (*clicking her index finger*), or to Germany (*click!*), or to Canada (*click!*), all of the foreigners will say, 'There's a Mursi, there's a Mursi, there's a Mursi!' They will come and look at me, [they will] see the lip, [they will] see the ears and will say: 'She's Mursi, she's Mursi!' Later they will say nice things. If you go, they will say, 'Hee! She doesn't have a

dangling lip, she can't be a Mursi.'

L: But I have a hole [my four lower incisors have been removed].

B: "There's no [dangling] lip, she's definitely not Mursi!"

L: I have a hole.

B: That's what the people in Canada will say.

L: I have a hole!

B: That's what the people in Arba Minch and Germany will say.

L: I also had my lips and ears cut and still look like a Mursi. Don't you understand? When tourists look at me, they will see that I have let my lip shrink back, but that doesn't mean they won't also look at me. Shauna it's true.

B: Okay!

L: Even if I have my lip sewn back, the tourists will still shoot [their cameras] at me.

B: I want the tourists [to come]. She says that she will have her lip stitched and still find tourists who will want to take her picture, even when she abandons her culture, they will still point [their camera] at her?

L: That's enough! I understand what you are saying. But if tomorrow we go together, me and Barmille and Shauna, together to Jinka, we can learn the language of the foreigners, we can be students, students in Jinka.

L: Wouldn't you [want to] go? You don't want to? You wouldn't go?

B: Yes, I'd go.

In general, the voices of these two Mursi women are those of a culture in transition: they capture the same generation of women and different levels of commitment to Mursi life. Barmille articulates that the lip-plate announces who she is and suggests that outsiders will want to get closer to her, and will be more interested in her. Legessa's comments reveal a desire to belong, to blend in better, noting that with a dangling lip, outsiders would make fun of the drool dripping down her chin. This is a common complaint also made by some young Mursi men today¹⁵. Interestingly, Barmille feels that she would still be seen as a Mursi even with a smaller lip, or if she were to have it sewn back¹⁶. People would still recognize that her four lower incisors had been removed (in order to fit a lip-plate), for instance.

The lip-plate serves as both a major component of one's sense of pride

and identity in the 'private' world of Mursi, and as a tool for mediating the potential conflicts that can arise when crossing over the periphery of the public world. Unlike a garment-wearing Mursi man¹⁷, who does not appear as unapproachable and strange to most casual observers as a Mursi woman with a leather dress and lip-plate, Legessa argues that the latter two are obstacles in becoming a fully educated 'citizen of the state'. Barmille, on the other hand, wishes to build on what she perceives as a new strength to establish new economic gains in certain situations, especially through encounters with tourists. She has appropriated, as have many Mursi women, this aesthetic category of 'Mursi identity' and transformed it in both discourse and practice¹⁸.

It is not difficult to find examples of women like Legesse who stretch the limits by shrinking their lips and others, like Barmille, who are judgemental about it. This case illustrates the complex way in which Mursi women are currently choosing to wear or not wear the lip-plate as an act of volition. In other words, it provides an example of how social agency can be attributed to women who choose to wear or choose not to wear the lip-plate.

Conclusion

There is an absence of data that represent and reflect Mursi women's narratives and the ways in which Mursi women respond to change and represent themselves, whether in the presence of Ethiopian officials, European tourists, or neighboring Mursi. This essay is a first attempt to explore how Mursi narratives, particularly those of women, can be used to express their shared cultural knowledge and sense of pride, in this case, by adorning themselves with lip-plates. My objective in this paper was to afford the reader a first glimpse of the meaning of the lip-plate and how it encourages women to internalize a prescribed set of gendered expectations for behavior (Arthur, 1999).

This first phase of field research indicates an analytical need to go beyond narrowly drawn descriptions of the lip-plate as an expression of extreme alterity and source of stigma, both in historical and contemporary terms. Stigmatization of Mursi women needs to be addressed through qualitative research that will present a fuller picture of the construction of Mursi women's identity from the perspective of Mursi women. I would like to end with the words of a Mursi woman, someone with experience in cutting girl's lips, as she responds to the question of what would happen if the Ethiopian authorities were to follow through with their threats to ban

this tradition¹⁹:

If foreigners or government people come and talk to us, we will say: “I won’t cut my lip! No, we won’t cut our lips! We won’t put in lip-plates.” We will say this to them. We will say it like this, but when they leave we will go on living the way we do. And when they come back, we will hide our children until they leave again. This has not happened yet, but it could happen in the future (Mursi woman, Makki, 27 May 2004).

Notes

¹ I thank Peri Klemm for her inspiring work on body adornment among Afran Qallo Oromo women in Eastern Hararghe, Ethiopia. Her doctoral dissertation lent support to my own ideas (Klemm, 2002).

² David Turton began his fieldwork among the Mursi in 1968. He has conducted comprehensive studies on ethnographic topics ranging from Mursi warfare and migration to pastoralism and political organisation. One topic that has yet to be covered in depth is women’s culture. I would like to thank him and his wife Pat for their support and for the unforgettable basket of fruit that they brought me during my first month of fieldwork.

³ Turton has addressed various aspects of contemporary cultural contact and change among the Mursi, such as encounters with tourists and missionaries, as well as, government and park officials in various articles (for example, Turton 1995; 2002; 2004) and in his latest documentary film “Fire Will Eat Us” (2000). How the Mursi themselves view and respond to these changes still requires further investigation.

⁴ The Kwegu, numbering approximately 300, are an ethnic group living along the Omo River. The Mursi do not think very highly of them because they have very few cattle.

⁵ Over a three year period (2003-2005) the Ethiopian government plans to resettle 100,000 heads of households to the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Regions (SNNPR). This is only part of a much larger resettlement scheme which is thought to alleviate population pressure and food insecurity, especially in Sidama, Gedeo, Wolaita, Kambata and Tambaro, and Hadiyya Zones (Abbate, 2004: 1). It should be noted that the Mursi (like their Bodi neighbors) have yet to be formally informed about such resettlement plans in South Omo.

⁶ In the recent illustrated text *Touching Ethiopia*, three pages contain glossy photographs of Mursi women; two of which portray the “spectacular labial

plate, lobe rings and shaven head of a Mursi woman” (Gozalbez and Cebrian, 2004: 24). The authors further note that “[t]here are different sizes and shapes (circular and trapezoidal) . . .” of lip-plates, and “[s]ometimes the centre is hollow, forming a large labial ring” (126). Whereas the Mursi in fact only wear circular lip-plates, the trapezoidal (and circular) are worn mainly by the Surma (personal communication with Bi Kalumi Habakorro, Makki, February 2, 2005). A lip-plate with a hole in the centre holds significant meaning for the wearer and the person who observes her while wearing it. There are purity and pollution taboos associated with this particular lip-plate which will not be elaborated on here but after future research.

⁷ See (Turton, 2004: 3-4).

⁸ I would like to thank Oli Sirali not only for proofreading this paper during our long trek to Kurum, but for his constant encouragement to learn Mursi and his wonderful sense of humour that has helped me during my most frustrating moments in the field.

⁹ During the girl’s competitive *ula* (bracelet) fighting which frequently follows men’s stick duelling, a girl will take her lip-plate out and carefully tuck her bottom lip in with a piece of cloth, leaves or leather in order to prevent it from getting torn during a fight. Unfortunately, there is too little space to expand on the *ula* competitions here.

¹⁰ If a married woman allows her lip to shrink, it is no longer considered disrespectful when she does not wear her lip-plate while in the presence of her husband and his guests.

¹¹ This includes the husband, his brothers and in fact all affinal kin.

¹² This is something I have learned based on my own behaviour. For example, there are days when I have jogged to the river to fetch water. This is something that I quickly found out a girl might get away with, but not a woman. The women constantly scold me for doing things too hastily, like blowing too hard on my fire or sloppily carrying my water so that it spills down my back.

¹³ Food should be served as follows: the basket of sorghum (carried always in the left hand) should be set down before the calabash with boiled leaves (carried always in the right hand). A milk container should never be set directly on the ground.

¹⁴ On several occasions government officials have visited Makki and have expressed to Mursi elders that, among other things, the women should

stop cutting their lips. One young Mursi man describes one of these meetings:

“Three years ago Amhara officials came and talked to our elders. This is what they said: ‘People of Makki, you must stop shooting buffalo, stop shooting antelope, stop shooting leopards, stop shooting jackal, stop shooting lesser kudu, stop shooting zebra, stop shooting giraffe, stop shooting warthog. . . only tend to your cattle! If you herd your cows, we will give you clothes. We want you to wear clothes, throw your skins away; we don’t want this. You can go to Barka and sell your cows and get Birr to buy clothes. You should throw these things away and stop wearing lip-plates. These are things of the past. Why go on wearing lip-plates? Eventually you will become educated, the people of Makki, from the grasslands, from Bongo, they will go to school and soon your children will stop wearing the lip-plates’ (personal communication with Ba Tui Dhedhep, November 24, 2004)

¹⁵ Two young men come to mind: one is a recent Christian convert; the other has spent several years in a Jinka prison. When asked about what they will look for in a future wife, both said that they would prefer to marry someone without a lip-plate because they dislike the drool that would drip down her chin as a result of having her lip cut. They also explained that they would feel embarrassed if they were to travel together to Arba Minch or Addis Ababa because a woman with a lip-plate would be stared at and made fun of.

¹⁶ As far as I know, only one Mursi woman (from Makki) has had her lip sewn back by a medical doctor in Jinka. Despite numerous rumours that exist, her reasons for doing so have yet to be fully understood.

¹⁷ When Mursi men travel to the local market they will put on T-shirts (as well as jeans, hats and sunglasses if they have them) just before they reach a local village (like the Aari village of Belamer) or town (like Jinka) in order to blend in more. The women rarely do anything to blend in, though some will cover their breasts or wear men’s cloth or skirts instead of skins.

¹⁸ Jon Abbink discusses a similar occurrence among the Surma (Abbink, 2000).

¹⁹ It should be noted that pressure from the government to ban the lip-plate goes back to the days of the ‘Dergue’. As Turton writes: “Since the years of the Dergue, the Soviet-backed government of Mengistu Haile Mariam (1975-91), government officials have been hammering home the message to the Mursi that the lip-plate represents an ‘uncivilised’ custom

which must be abandoned if they are to be 'developed' (2004:5).

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