

# Lip-plates and the people who take photographs

## Uneasy encounters between Mursi and tourists in southern Ethiopia

### DAVID TURTON

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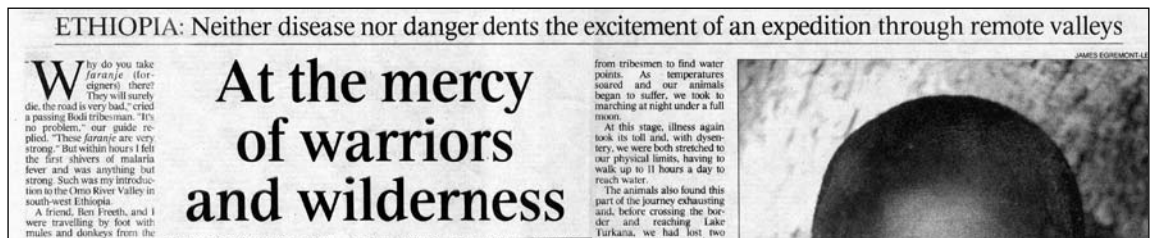


Fig. 1. An article by James Egremont-Lee in the travel section of *The Times*, 9 March 1996. Note how the article has been 'framed', not only by the inevitable photograph of a woman wearing a lip-plate but also by such key words as 'remote', 'warriors' and 'wilderness'.

The Mursi live in the far southwest of Ethiopia, about 100 km north of the Kenyan border, in the valley of the River Omo. They number less than 10,000 and are one of the last groups in Africa amongst whom it is still the norm for women to wear large pottery or wooden 'plates' in their lower lips.<sup>1</sup> The lip-plate has become the chief visible distinguishing characteristic of the Mursi, in coffee-table books and travel articles in weekend newspapers (see Figs 1 and 2). It has also made them a prime attraction for tourists, as the following quotation from an article in a South African newspaper indicates.

Tourists are... now flocking to the south of the country to see the diverse ethnic groups who live in the harsh environment of the Omo Valley. Among the most visited groups is the Mursi, renowned for the huge clay lip plates worn by the women. (*Mail and Guardian*, 2002)

In the promotional literature of the tourist industry, the lip-plate is presented as evidence of a quintessentially 'tribal' existence, relatively 'untouched' by the modern world. Ironically, however, it is the growing need of the Mursi for cash, as their economy becomes increasingly dependent on market exchange, that drives them to supply the tourists' demand for photographs. Each woman photographed expects to be paid 2 Ethiopian Birr – less than 20p – for each photograph taken of her, although she normally has to settle for 2 Birr for each series of photographs taken of her by a single tourist. The money is spent in high-land markets on such items as grain, salt, goat skins for skirts, and the alcoholic drink *arake*, which is used to provide hospitality for agricultural work parties. But although eagerly sought after by both sides, this 'encounter' between the Mursi and tourists appears to be as uncomfortable and unsatisfactory for those who take part in it as it is disturbing for those who witness it. In this paper I ask why this should be so, and find a large part of the answer in the lip-plate itself, and in what it means for those who wear it, and for those who photograph it.

### The lip-plate

A girl's lower lip is cut, by her mother or by another woman of her settlement, when she reaches the age of 15 or 16. The cut is held open by a wooden plug until the wound heals. It appears to be up to the individual girl to decide how far to stretch the lip, by inserting progressively larger plugs over a period of several months. Figure 3 shows a girl of about 15, Nga Mokonyi, in December 1969. Her lip had been cut a month earlier by her mother, Nga Dogun, who had also performed the operation for three of Nga Mokonyi's local age mates. I was living at this time near Nga Dogun's settlement, at Koibatha, on the left bank of the River Omo. When this photograph was taken, the plug in Nga Mokonyi's lip was about one centimetre across. She continued to stretch her lip, using progressively larger wooden plugs, for at least the next three

from tribesmen to find water pools. As temperatures soared and our animals began to suffer, we took to marching at night under a full moon.

At this stage, illness again took its toll and, with dysentery, we were both stretched to our physical limits, having to walk up to 11 hours a day to reach water.

The animals also found this part of the journey exhausting and, before crossing the border and reaching Lake Turkana, we had lost two donkeys to the harsh desert conditions.

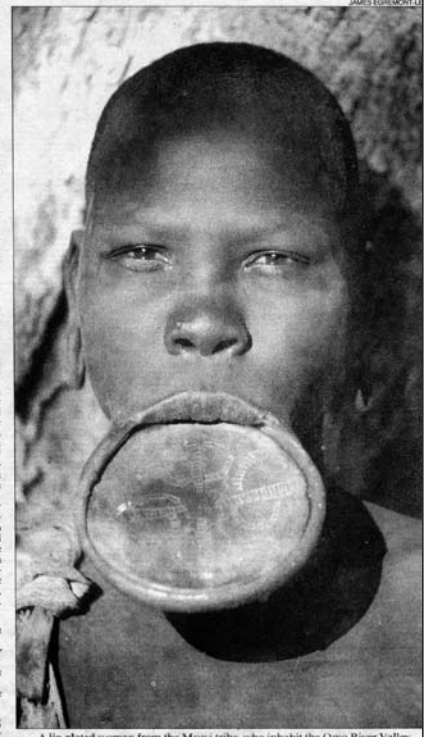
The lake ended our water troubles. With relief we marveled at the immense body of jade water surrounded, in contrast, by vast desert and stunning lava deposits. The final two weeks made riveting walking as we followed the flaming-fringed lake shore. The Sablos National Park teemed with game grazing along a narrow grass belt separating lake from desert, and we were often accompanied by herds of zebra or topi antelope staring in curiosity at our animals.

The fossil riches of the area are well recognised and we noticed fragments of fossilised bone strewn for miles over the black lava fields. In this area live the Turkana, again a people almost unchanged for centuries. Adorned with decorative colour, they lead a frugal existence, tending goats and camels.

Travelling through their timeless and dramatically barren land, our journey drew to an end. Here we felt we had reached a stage where the expedition had evolved from an exciting novelty to a life-style which we could have gladly continued indefinitely, echoing the words of T.S. Eliot:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our  
Exposing  
Will be to arrive where we  
started,  
And know the place for the  
first time.

JAMES  
EGREMONT-LEE



A lip-plated woman from the Mursi tribe, who inhabit the Omo River Valley

months. During this period, she and her three age mates came regularly to my camp and asked me to saw off suitably sized pieces of wood from a length of tree branch, which they would then shape into lip-plugs with a knife. On 26 February I wrote in my notebook:

Nga Mokonyi and co. are wearing wooden lip-plugs which they change every night, inserting a slightly bigger one each time.

Two days later I wrote:

Nga Mokonyi is really going through it again tonight – really in pain, judging by the crying that is going on now. The girls are coming each morning to have me saw off new plugs for them.

A week later I measured one of Nga Mokonyi's discarded plugs and found that it was 5 centimetres across.

I do not know for how much longer she continued to stretch her lip. This varies from individual to individual and is related, presumably, to her willingness to put up with the pain and discomfort. But, given the long-drawn-out and painful nature of the process, those who persevere until their lips can take plates of 12 centimetres or more in diameter (which is quite normal) are clearly very highly motivated indeed (see Figs 4, 5, 6 and 7).<sup>2</sup>

Two claims frequently made about the lip-plate, by travel writers and journalists, are that its size is correlated with the size of a woman's bridewealth<sup>3</sup> and that the practice originated in a deliberate attempt to make women less attractive to slave traders. The first claim is not born out by the case of Nga Mokonyi and her age mates. Their marriages had already been arranged, and the amount of bridewealth to be paid by their husband's families had already been agreed, *before* they had their lips pierced. Indeed, for all but one of them, some of the bridewealth had already been handed over.<sup>4</sup> They would not join their husbands for at least a year from the date when their lips were pierced and they would not engage in sexual inter-

An earlier version of this paper was given as part of a seminar series on 'Body and self. Bodily modification and the representation of identity', at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford, in March 2001. I am grateful to the organizer of the series, Shirley Ardener, for her invitation and encouragement and for comments received at the seminar. The paper also formed the basis of a talk given at a meeting of the Goethe Institute, Addis Ababa, in April 2003. I am grateful for helpful comments received from two anonymous referees for AT.

1. As far as I know, the only other African groups amongst whom the practice is still found live immediately to the west of the Mursi, towards and beyond the border with the Sudan. These include the Surma or Suri, who number about 30,000 and whose encounter with tourists has been described by Jon Abbink (2000), in a paper that anticipates many of the points made here.



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Fig. 2. A full-page advertisement by the Ethiopian National Tourist Organization (NTO), taken from *Selamta*, the in-flight magazine of Ethiopian Airlines (Vol. 19, No. 1, 2002, p. 36).

course until their lips were fully healed.<sup>5</sup>

The supposed historical link between lip-plates and the activities of slave traders is an idea that goes back to colonial times. In an article in the September 1938 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, C. and M. Thaw report meeting women with large plates in both their upper and lower lips near Fort Archambault, on the River Chari, about 400 miles southeast of Lake Chad, in what was then French Equatorial Africa (see Figure 8).<sup>6</sup>

Here both the upper and lower lips of girl babies are pierced and small wooden plugs inserted into the holes. As they grow up, these holes are gradually increased in size until they reach the dimensions of large soup plates... This form of disfigurement was begun centuries ago to discourage slave raiders, the French Administrator told us. Why it didn't discourage the young men of the tribe, as well, we will never know. (Thaw & Thaw 1938: 357)

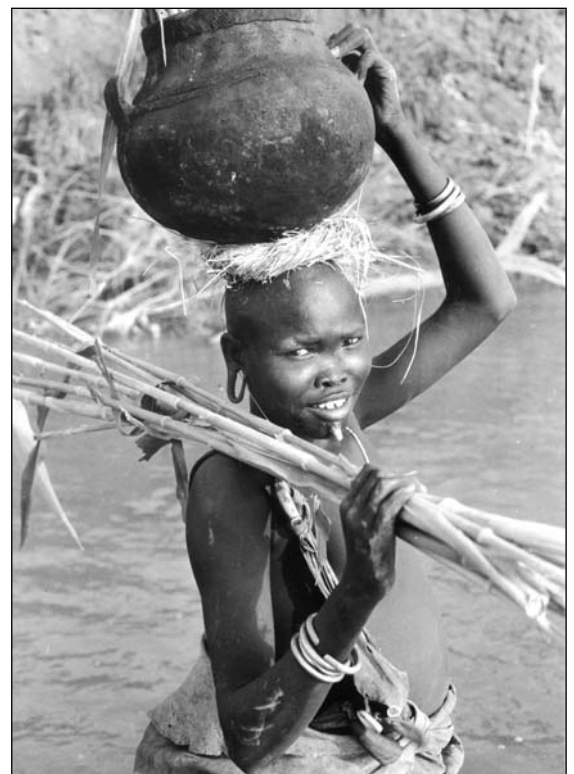
This 'explanation' of the lip-plate, as a 'form of disfigurement', tells us more about the assumptions and values of those who find it persuasive than it does about the practice which it is supposed to explain. One obvious problem with it is that lip-plates are unique neither to Africa, nor to women. 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.

The lip-plug, which reaches such a large size among older men, is incontestably the most striking piece of Kayapo finery. Only males have their lips pierced. This happens soon after birth, but at first only a string of beads with a bit of shell is placed in the

hole to keep it open. After initiation, young bachelors begin to put progressively larger wooden pins through the hole to enlarge it. This gradual process continues through the early years of adulthood, but accelerates when a man graduates to the senior male grade of 'fathers-of-many-children' (ibid.: 120-21)

As Turner points out, the boundary of the body, the skin, is everywhere treated as the boundary of the biological individual and as 'the frontier of the social self' (ibid.: 112). When seen in this light, the lip-plate worn by Mursi women is an expression of female social adulthood and reproductive potential. It is analogous not only to the lip-plate worn by a Kayapo man, which marks his fully adult status, but also to the penis sheath that is 'bestowed' on a Kayapo boy at puberty and which 'symbolises the collective appropriation of male powers of sexual reproduction for purposes of social reproduction' (ibid.: 119). We cannot know why the stretching of the lower lip is used, among the Mursi, to symbolize female social adulthood – or rather, given the 'performative' role of such symbolism (Austin, 1982), to *make* girls into adults – any more than we can know why Mursi men do not wear penis sheaths. But the occurrence of lip-stretching in other parts of the world, amongst both men and women, and the universal use of body decoration and alteration as a kind of bridge between the biological and social selves, makes it at least implausible to explain the practice amongst the Mursi as no more than a response to a particular set of historical circumstances. For if we were to do this, we would then have to search for different sets of historical circumstances to explain the occurrence of the practice in other, geographically and culturally widely diverse settings.

Another reason for rejecting this historical explanation is that it is not one the Mursi themselves appear to have heard of – any more than they make a connection between the size of a woman's lip-plate and the size of her bridewealth. When one asks a Mursi woman why she stretched her lip, she usually replies, simply and predictably, with a version of the phrase 'It is our custom'. Pressing a bit further one might be told that it makes a woman into a fully-fledged adult, like her mother. A man might say that it is good to see his wife wearing her lip-plate when she comes to give him his daily meal of sorghum porridge, as he sits in the evening with the other



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Fig. 3. Nga Mokonyi, photographed at Koibatha on the River Omo in December 1969, a month after her lip had been cut.



Fig. 4. An unmarried girl, wearing a pottery lip-plate and her father's hat, photographed with my wife, Pat Turton, in 1973.



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2. All girls have their four lower incisors removed as children, which is necessary to enable their eventual lip-plates to fit.

3. In a book of photographs by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, the caption to a photograph of a 'Surma' woman, wearing a large lip-plate, reads: 'The size of the lip plate indicates the number of cattle that a young man must pay for her dowry [sic]. This bride wears a plate symbolising the bride-price of seventy-five cattle' (2000: 60).

4. It has been suggested to me that this does not rule out the possibility that a girl might continue to stretch her lip to take a plate of a size that would 'meet the agreed payment'. This is logically possible but empirically highly unlikely, not least because, in visits to the Mursi spanning the last 30 years, I have never heard any connection made between the size of a woman's lip-plate and the size of her bridewealth.

5. It is said that if a girl were to have sexual intercourse before her lip was fully healed, she would run the risk of the lip breaking.

6. I am grateful to David Wason for bringing this example to my attention.

7. It is interesting that a photographic image came to be applied to perhaps the most blatant expression of this relationship between prisoners and warders, in the steel cages of the US Government's 'Camp X-ray', at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

8. If one wished to date the beginning of this process, one could do worse than choose the early years of the last century, when the Ethiopian Emperor, Menelik II, was extending his control over the southwest.

9. The following excerpt, which is taken from unedited footage, was first published in Turton 1992 (pp. 286-7). A few minor alterations have been made to the translation in this version.

10. This is the name the Mursi give to the descendants of northern Ethiopians who colonized the southwest of the country in the early years of the last century. Arinyatuin is here referring to the tour company drivers who bring the tourists from Addis Ababa and/or Jinka.

men of the settlement. And for both men and women, the lip-plate is a powerful visual marker of Mursi identity. For a Mursi woman, not to have a pierced lip is to run the risk of being mistaken for a Kwegu, a client group of hunters who live along the banks of the Omo, while to have a pierced but not stretched lip is to run the risk of being mistaken for a Bodi, northern neighbours of the Mursi, with whom they are frequently at war (Bodi women insert small plugs in their lower lips). There are, however, powerful pressures, both direct and indirect, on Mursi women to give up the practice, and these pressures will undoubtedly prove irresistible.

Direct pressure comes from the government. Since the years of the 'Derg', 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 'uncivilized' custom which must be abandoned if they are to be 'developed'. As yet there are no administrative centres or police posts in Mursi territory, but the present government seems no less intent than its predecessor on stamping out this 'harmful traditional practice'. One regional government official is reported, for example, to have made a particularly gruesome (and presumably empty) threat at a meeting held for local administrative staff. Once there was a police post in Mursi territory, he said, any girl who decided to stretch her lip would have her lower lip cut off entirely, to make an example of her.

Despite the strength of government opposition to the practice, however, it is almost certainly indirect pressure that will be most effective in causing it to be abandoned. This comes mainly from the growing realization amongst the Mursi themselves that the lip-plate is seen as a mark of



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Fig. 5. An unmarried girl putting in a wooden lip-plate, 1974.

their backwardness by outsiders and that it will help to prolong their exclusion from the economic and social benefits of incorporation into the Ethiopian state. In particular, it will be an obstacle to the education of girls. Here I should mention the recent activities of Protestant missionaries who, since 1989, have established themselves in the Mago Valley, where a group of Mursi had migrated a few years earlier because of drought. The missionaries have not, as far as I know, spoken out specifically against the lip-plate. But their converts, who are at present concentrated around the mission station and may number in the region of 50 individuals, are likely to be at the forefront of efforts, coming from within the community itself, to abandon such 'traditional' practices and customs.

### The tourists

On the one hand, then, the lip-plate is prized by Mursi men and women as a mark of their cultural identity and political autonomy. On the other hand, they recognize that outsiders see it as a mark of their backwardness, which must be abandoned if they are to gain the benefits of 'development'. This ambivalence is heightened by another and, at first sight, contradictory message about the lip-plate which has been reaching the Mursi in recent years, through the activities of tourists. For, while tourists are presumed to share the general disdain for, not to say disgust at, the practice shown by outsiders, they nevertheless come great distances mainly, it seems, in order to photograph this symbol of Mursi backwardness.

Mursi territory lies within and between the Omo and Mago National Parks (see figure 9), three days drive and 840 km from Addis Ababa, over progressively rougher and more difficult roads. During the last ten years, increasing numbers of European and North American tourists have made their way into this area, attracted by the image presented to them in tourist brochures of one of the last 'wildernesses' in Africa, inhabited by wild animals, naked warriors and women with stretched lips. In fact, they rarely encounter large game animals and appear to be more attracted by the opportunity to see and photograph the local people. Mainly because of the lip-plates worn by Mursi women, the Mursi are high on, if not at the top of, the tourists' list of 'must-see' attractions. The lip-plate has therefore become an economic asset for Mursi women and their families. From this point of view, the bigger the lip-plate the better. As one man jokingly put it to me, with deliberate exaggeration, 'If your wife has a large lip-plate, she can fill your cattle compound'.

And yet the encounter between Mursi and tourists is clearly a tense and uneasy one for both sides. The Mursi seem determined not to let the tourists forget that they have come for no other purpose than to 'take' photographs, while the tourists seem intent on getting the photographs they need, buying a few artefacts (such as bracelets, baskets and, of course, lip-plates) and making their getaway as quickly as possible. For the onlooker it is a depressing and disturbing sight, to see the women, alternating between aggressive demands for money and sullen passivity, as a phalanx of video cameras pan up and down their bodies, and to see the tourists selecting particular 'specimens' from the crowd to be filmed and photographed. This is an encounter which is almost entirely stripped of any form of 'normal' social intercourse. As Abbink writes of Suri interactions with tourists, the meeting between Mursi and tourists 'is more of a "confrontation" than a normal social interaction' (2000: 8.)

Such confrontations have made the Mursi famous and infamous at the same time. Here is a quotation from an article by Amanda Jones that appeared in the Travel section of the *Sunday Times*, under the heading 'Tribes and tribulations':

Fig. 6. Two married women, one with and one without a lip-plate, 1970.



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The final leg of our journey was to the Mursi people. In southern Ethiopia, this is the tribe who strike fear into the hearts of northern Ethiopians and tourists alike. We'd heard so many lamentable tales about their behaviour that we didn't really know what to expect. The problem is that you can't possibly come all this way and miss the Mursi, famous for the lip plates the women wear in their lower lips.

Because of their reputation, most visitors make a six-hour round trip drive from Mago National Park to see them. They come tearing down the road, jump out of their cars with cameras blazing and Birr a-flying, create a riot, get scared, jump back into the car, lock the doors and take off again after 15 minutes. The Mursi have this down to a fine art. They encircle the *ferengie*, manhandle them a little, exact inflated sums for photos, force them to buy chipped lip plates and then whip up such a racket that the tourists retreat with only a few terrible snap shots of lip plates looming inches from their lens to show for their expensive foray into Mursi land. (Jones, 1999)

'Lamentable tales' told about the Mursi are nothing new. The first Europeans to write about them were Lamberto Vannutelli and Carlo Citerni, members of an Italian Geographical Society expedition, led by Vittorio Bottego, which followed the left bank of the Omo down to Lake Turkana in 1896. In their official account of the expedition, Vannutelli and Citerni write of the Mursi as follows.

Living in a country that has been, up to now, unknown both to

the white man and the surrounding blacks, it is easy to understand why their way of life has remained little different from that of animals... The women are deformed and ugly and quite naked except for a narrow piece of skin around their waists. Some have large holes in the ears and lower lip into which they put wooden discs reaching a diameter of five or six centimetres... This savage tribe has detestable tendencies and bestial habits. And yet they do not have a ferocious nature and are not as warlike as the highlanders. But, in compensation for this, their ability to hide themselves in the bush and their instinctive cunning makes them audacious thieves. (1899: 320-23, my translation)

The same theme of a general lack of socialized, rule-governed behaviour is echoed in any number of present-day travellers' accounts, such as the one quoted above from the *Sunday Times*. Another example comes from the 'Lonely Planet' guide, *Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti*. This has a boxed section, said to be based on the author's diary, entitled 'A trip to visit the Mursi'. Here is an extract.

'OK, Ten minutes and then we are out of there', Abraha the driver said with great authority.

'Ten minutes? But why?' I asked.

'You don't know the Mursi. They are thieves' he said. 'Thieves!' raising his voice for extra effect...

'They would even take the shoes from your feet, I tell you, Abraha continued.

We were off that day to the lower Omo River in southern Ethiopia, home to several Nilotic-Omoti peoples, including the Mursi, considered among the most fascinating and colourful tribes on earth.

'Of all of them, the Mursi, they are the bad ones', Abraha went on. '...They are savages, savages!'

As we pulled into the first Mursi village at last, Abraha gave some final words of warning: 'So remember, we take off all watches, we lock all doors, and we stay awake. Ten minutes' he added firmly. (2000: 242-3)

### The photographs

One way to explain these 'lamentable tales' would be to focus on what Susan Sontag calls the 'predatory' nature of the 'photographic act'.

[T]here is something predatory in the act of *taking* a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. (1979: 14, emphasis added)

Fig. 7. Two unmarried girls whose lips had recently been cut and stretched, at Kon Ba, on the River Mago, 2002.



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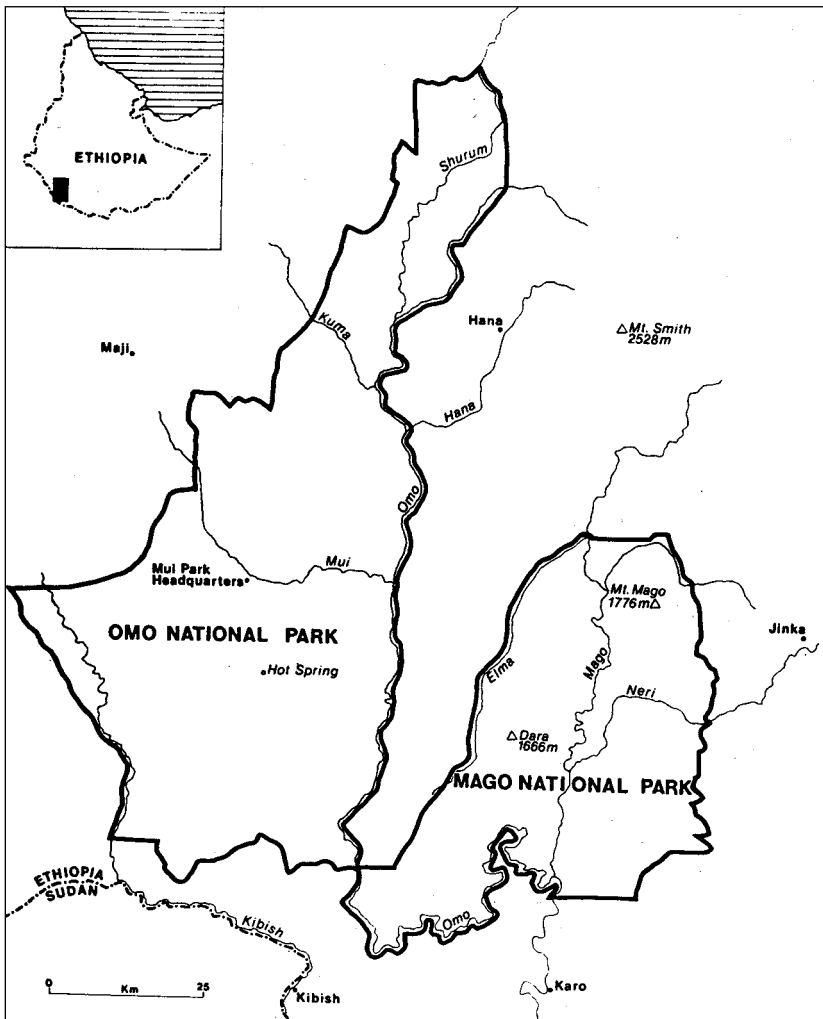


Fig. 8. A photograph from the National Geographic Magazine, accompanying an article by C. and M. Thaw (1938). It shows a woman from 'the country of the Ubangi natives', on the River Chari, 400 miles southeast of Lake Chad, in what was then French Equatorial Africa and is now Chad.

Sontag is talking here of the photographic act in general. But when we come to look specifically at photographs taken by Westerners of non-Westerners or, more generally, at photographs taken by the rich of the poor, her point seems even more compelling. This is because the power differential between photographer and human subject is here that much more obvious. As James Faris writes, in his book on photography and the Navajo, 'To stand on some absolute right to make photographs is to resort to the most western and capitalist of foundations... the absolute right to be able to see anyone, anywhere. It is to stand on power' (1996: 306). Christopher Pinney makes the same point by drawing an analogy between photography and the exercise of surveillance, as expressed in Michel Foucault's Panoptical model of power relations in the modern state. In the Panopticon prison, the prisoners are always visible to the warders in their central observation tower. The warders know all about the prisoners but, for the prisoners, the warders live in a relatively unknown world. 'In photography', writes Pinney, 'the photographer is invisible behind his camera, while what he sees is rendered completely visible' (1992: 76).<sup>7</sup>

There is no doubt about the differential power relation between the Mursi and tourists. Nor is there any doubt that the Mursi see the act of taking photographs as a predatory one, an act by which they are captured and appropriated, an act by which they become, as one man put it in a conversation I quote from below, the 'children' of the tourists. But this does not explain why tourists so frequently single out the Mursi, from amongst all their neighbours, as rapacious, aggressive and generally 'difficult' to deal with. To explain this we need to take into account not only the predatory nature of the photographic act, and the unequal power relationship upon which it is based, but also the motivation of the tourists for visiting the Mursi in the first

Fig. 9. The Omo and Mago National Parks. Mursi territory is bounded to the west and south by the River Omo and to the east by the River Mago. Its northern boundary corresponds roughly with a line drawn between the Omo/Mui confluence and Mt Mago (called Kutulatulla by the Mursi).



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through a spot where the bush fire had roared a moment before.

For a hundred yards all we could see was hungry flames through stiling smoke; and the roaring of the main fire, now on our right, drowned the open exhausts of the cars as we rushed, full speed, ahead. It was probably only a few seconds; but it seemed hours before we broke through the charred and smoldering bush into clear air.

At every instant we expected to hear the deafening report of a gasoline explosion, as we stopped the light car in the clear air and waited for the lumbering trucks to break through the curtain of smoke. First one, and then the other appeared; the boys on top crouching low with the tarpaulin over their heads; we breathed again.

LAND OF THE BIG-LIPPED WOMEN

Fort Archambault, reached two days later, lies in the country of the Ubangi natives, land of the big-lipped women. Here both the upper and lower lips of girl babies are pierced and small

SUPPOSE HER HUSBAND HAD TO BUY HER LIPSTICK!

Her lower lip, about 25 inches in circumference, encircles the container for a 400-foot reel of motion picture film. So elastic has the skin become that when it is pulled it snaps back like a rubber band. Tradition tells that this form of mutilation was introduced centuries ago so that Ubangi women would not be sought by slave traders. But today big lips and shaved heads are fashionable.

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE

place. For they come, above all, to see and photograph not their houses, ceremonies, rituals and other social activities but their bodies. And not just their bodies, but a bodily alteration which symbolizes, to the Mursi their Mursiness, and to the tourists, their backwardness.

The Mursi know that the lip-plate is seen as a sign of their backwardness by powerful outsiders, whether government officials or tourists. They also know, therefore, that those who travel such great distances to obtain pictures of lip-plates are not doing so because they admire and respect the custom. It is not something they would wish to emulate – to see their own daughters practising – but, on the contrary, something they see as epitomizing the gulf between the rich, technologically advanced and morally superior world they inhabit and the poor, technologically backward and morally inferior world inhabited by the Mursi. The pleasure that tourists derive from this activity, therefore, is an exploitative pleasure, one that combines fascination with repulsion.

It is also the pleasure of consumerism: the tourists spend money on what they do not need, while the Mursi stand in front of the camera to be photographed, appropriated and objectified as archetypal primitives only because they need the money. An analogy with prostitution seems compelling. The Mursi – men and women, though mainly women – make commodities of their bodies like prostitutes and, like prostitutes, attempt to salvage some dignity and self-respect by driving the hardest bargain they can, never letting the customer forget that this is a straight-forward commercial transaction. The Mursi do not, of course, describe their interactions with tourists in these terms. But as one watches them, standing sullenly as the cameras click away, and visibly flinching as the video cameras approach from different angles, it is difficult not to conclude that they feel both violated and demeaned.

### The 'discomforts of localized existence'

In his article on tourism amongst the Suri, Abbink rightly points out that '[i]n its present, late twentieth century form, tourism is the expression of a particular kind of consumer identity with a global and globalizing impact. It emanates from societies that are relatively powerful and wealthy. Communities and places visited by tourists often undergo unforeseen changes...' (2000: 1). The main change experienced by the Mursi over the 30 years I have known them is a conceptual one, and it is a change to which tourism has made a powerful recent contribution.

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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 realize that the centre which they once saw themselves inhabiting has, as it were, slipped away from them. It has moved elsewhere, although they do not know exactly where, and they are revealed to themselves as a small, *localized*, poor, technologically backward and relatively powerless group, living on the margins of the Ethiopian state. They have come to suffer what Zygmunt Bauman calls 'the discomforts of localized existence'.

Being local in a globalized world is a sign of social deprivation and degradation. The discomforts of localized existence are compounded by the fact that with public spaces removed beyond the reaches of localized life, localities are losing their meaning-generating and meaning-negotiating capacity and are increasingly dependent on sense-giving and interpreting actions which they do not control (Bauman 1998: 2-3).

The verdicts of right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, proper and improper, useful and useless may only descend from on high, from regions never to be penetrated by any but the most inquisitive eye; the verdicts are unquestionable since no question may be meaningfully addressed to the judges and since the judges left no address... and no one can be sure where they reside. No room is left for the 'local opinion leaders'; no room is left for the 'local opinion' as such (ibid.: 25-26).

Bauman is here describing the end state of a process which still has some way to go for the Mursi, and which started long before I first met them.<sup>8</sup> In fact, large areas of Mursi life are still controlled by values and opinions that emanate from within Mursi society itself. But the realization that they are a small, localized group, 'dependent on sense-giving and interpreting actions which they do not control' is beginning to make perceptible inroads into the collective imagination of the Mursi. As Don Donham writes of the Maale, who live in the nearby Ethiopian highlands and for whom this process is further advanced, 'what has been altered are peoples' imaginations – their sense of their place in the world and the shape of their pasts and their futures' (1999: xviii).

### The last word

I shall give the last word to the Mursi, by quoting from an interview with three Mursi men, conducted during the making of a television documentary in 1991 (Woodhead, 1991). I had known these men for as long as I had known the Mursi. One was the priest (*Komoru*), or politico-ritual leader of the northern Mursi, Komorakora. One was a relative of Komorakora, Bio-iton-giga, who often acted as a representative of the northern Mursi in their dealings with the government. And one was a younger man, Arinyatuin, who was also used to dealing with government officials. During the course of this interview, with the film camera whirring away behind me, I asked what the Mursi thought about the tourists who were then beginning to penetrate Mursi territory, driving along the motor-track that links the Omo and Mago National Parks.

The resulting exchange contained many ironies, but I shall mention only two. First, what began as an interview, with the interviewer asking all the questions for the benefit of the TV audience, turned into a more equal exchange as I was forced to answer my own question – 'Why do the tourists take photographs?' – and thereby to confront my own behaviour and motivations. The answer that was eventually dragged out of me could, of course, have served equally well as an explanation of what I and the film crew

were doing. Second, my question gave the three men a chance to tell their own 'lamentable tales' about the tourists – and, by extension, about 'the world of the globally mobile' (Bauman 1998: 88) which the tourists inhabit and from which the Mursi are excluded. Commenting on the failure of tourists to pay what the Mursi regard as a fair price for photographs, Arinyatuin is led, with more justice than he could have realized, to brand all white people as 'thieves'.<sup>9</sup>

*DT*: When the tourists come up and down this road to the Omo and take photographs, and when we come and film you like this, what do you say about it, privately?

*Arinyatuin*: We say 'It's their thing. They are that sort of people – people who take photographs. It's the whites' thing'.

What do we know about it? You are the ones who know. We just sit here and they take photographs. There's one [a Polaroid photograph] that, as you look at it, you can see your own body appearing. If it's bad, tell us.

*DT*: I'm trying to find out what *you* think, in your stomachs.

*Arinyatuin*: In our stomachs? We've no idea. They can't speak our language, so we can't ask them why they are doing it. We can ask you, because you speak Mursi. They come with Kuchumba,<sup>10</sup> who just sit in the cars. When the tourists have taken their photographs, they drive off.

We say, 'Is it just that they want to know who we are, or what? They must be people who don't know how to behave.' Even old women come and totter about taking photographs. 'Is this how whites normally behave?' That's what we say.

*DT*: (Laughing) So that's what you say!

*Bio-iton-giga*: Goloimeri – why do they do it? Do they want us to become their children, or what? What do they want the photographs for?

*DT*: They come because they see you as different and strange people. They go back home and tell their friends that they've been on a long trip, to Mursiland. They say: 'Look, here are the people we saw.' They do it for entertainment.

*Komorakora*: Recently, the Administrator at Hana told us, 'Build a nice big house, with a fence – a big house, well built. The vets can use it when they treat the cattle and the tourists can photograph it. The tourists come to enjoy themselves. They can sleep in the house and go back the next day.'

That's what he said – what's his name?

*Bio-iton-giga*: Dawit Shumbulu.

*Komorakora*: Yes, that's it, Dawit Shumbulu. That's what he said. We said to each other, 'Are we here just for their amusement?' Now you've said the same, so that must be it.

*Bio-iton-giga*: If they are going to take photographs, they should give us a lot of money shouldn't they? But they don't.

*DT*: That's bad. Is that how they behave?

*Arinyatuin*: Yes, we are always arguing with them. They cheat us.

*Bio-iton-giga*: They'll take a lot of photographs, give us a single note, and then get in their cars and drive off.

*DT*: Don't you complain?

*Bio-iton-giga*: Of course we do. But they dive into their cars and escape.

*Arinyatuin*: They are thieves, aren't they? White people are thieves.

*DT*: Yes, it's bad. What about the Kuchumba – they are different from the whites, aren't they?

*Arinyatuin*: Yes. They don't take photographs. They just ask for food. 'Give us a goat to eat,' they say.

So we just give them one, When a lot of them come, it's for tax. Don't you have tax in your country?

*DT*: Yes, we do.

*Arinyatuin*: There's none of this going round taking photographs with the Kuchumba – they are more like us. This photography thing comes from your country, [smiling] where the necklace beads grow. Give us a car and we'll go and take photographs of you. ●