

# Commission on Nomadic Peoples

“‘We must teach them to be peaceful’: Mursi Views on being Human and being Mursi”

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## "We Must Teach Them to Be Peaceful": Mursi views on being human and being Mursi

David Turton

Most anthropological approaches to warfare, whether "political" or "materialist", are based on the Hobbesian assumption, mediated by Durkheim, that human beings are by *nature* competitive and prone to violence and that social order is the result of the constraining influence of the group over individual self interest. The Mursi of southwestern Ethiopia do not share this concept of human nature. It is impossible, in their language, to consider human beings apart from their social relationships: the only defining feature of "being human" is the capacity for social behaviour, or "sociality". It follows that warfare cannot be seen by the Mursi simply as a failure of society to control the "natural" aggression of individuals and groups. On the contrary, it is for them more like a common ritual language through which, in their own eyes and in those of their neighbours, they "make" themselves into an autonomous political unit—through which, in other words, they make themselves Mursi.

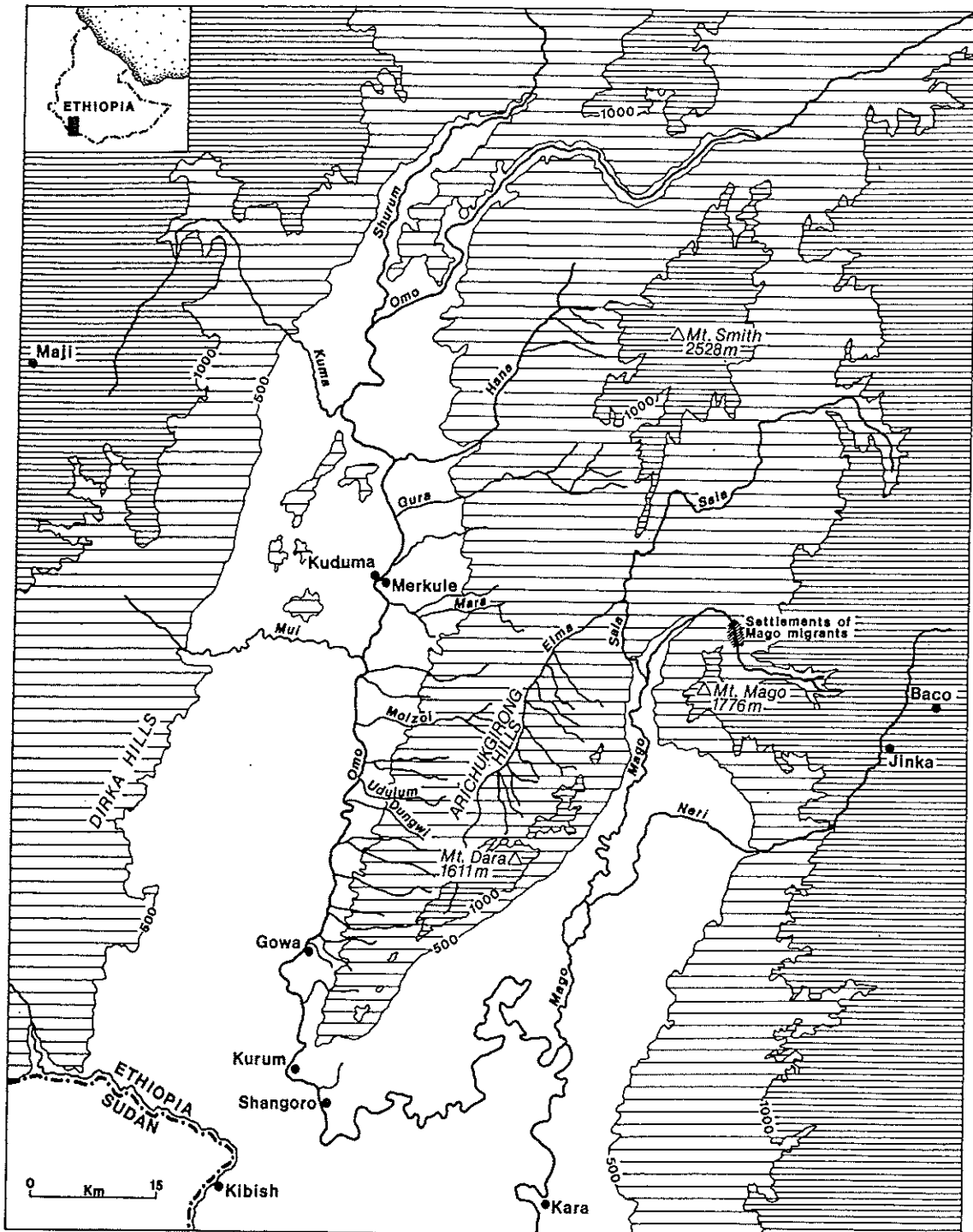
In December 1990, a few months before the overthrow of the Ethiopian government of Mengistu Haile Mariam, I was speaking to a local government official about a recent spate of inter-ethnic violence in the Lower Omo Valley, in the far southwest of the country. He made one remark that was particularly striking, coming as it did from an official of a state with the largest army in Africa and which was ravaged to the point of disintegration by internal warfare: "We must teach them to be peaceful". There was nothing illogical in this remark, but it was clearly based on very different assumptions about warfare and about what it means to be human from those of the people we were discussing. This article is an attempt to elucidate the difference.

One of the terms of reference given to contributors to the workshop which led to this book<sup>1</sup> was "to depict concrete examples of the impact of war on the disadvantaged sector of the population". As an anthropologist, this seemed a worthwhile and manageable objective. The typical research method of the anthropologist involves lengthy and intense involvement in the daily life of a single local community which is

likely to be relatively poor and powerless. He or she should be well placed, therefore, to provide detailed and vivid empirical data about the local impact of war.

The depiction of "concrete examples", however, is not something which can be done as if from behind a one-way glass screen, so that all we have to do is position ourselves correctly in order to produce a perfectly objective account of what happened—and what would have happened even had we not observed it. The activity of writing about war—or anything else for that matter—cannot be insulated from the activity which is thus represented, nor from the cultural assumptions of the writer. This is where a second characteristic of the anthropological method is relevant: because of his or her commitment to understanding behaviour in terms of the cultural categories of the actors, he or she can offer a critical perspective on the attitudes and assumptions of those, including anthropologists, who represent and try to make sense of other peoples' wars. This, according to Marcus and Fischer (1986), is one of the "promises" of modern anthropology: "to make accessible the normally unexamined assumptions

Figure 1. *The Lower Oromo Valley*



by which we operate and through which we encounter members of other cultures" (*op.cit.* ix).

My aim in this article is to "make accessible" some of the "normally unexamined assumptions" we make about war, in particular (1) that human beings are "by nature" self interested, competitive and aggressive, (2) that society, or the state, exists to prevent human beings from pursuing their individual self interest by violent means and (3) that warfare is simply violence in pursuit of individual self-interest raised to the level of the politico-territorial group. My method will be to elucidate, as far as I am able, the collective view of one particular African people, the Mursi of southwestern Ethiopia, on what it means to be a human being and to be a Mursi. I begin with a brief account of the Mursi experience of war over the twenty years that I have known them (for fuller accounts, see Turton, 1977, 1988 and 1989).

### The Mursi and Their Neighbours, 1970s-1990s

The Mursi are herders and cultivators who number between 4000 and 5000 and live in the Lower Omo Valley, about 100 kilometres north of the border between Ethiopia and Kenya. With only about one head of cattle per head of human population, they depend for well over half their subsistence needs on the cultivation of sorghum. There are two harvests each year, one (January/December) produced by flood retreat cultivation along the banks of the Omo and the other (June/July) by shifting cultivation in cleared woodland along the Omo's westward flowing tributaries (Figure 1). Flood cultivation, although small in extent, is relatively reliable because it depends on rain falling over the highland catchment area of the Omo, the largest river of western Ethiopia. (Much of the Omo catchment lies at an elevation of between 2000 and 3000 metres and its total extent is around 84,000 square kilometres (Butzer, 1971:1)). Shifting cultivation, on the other hand, is both unreliable, because it

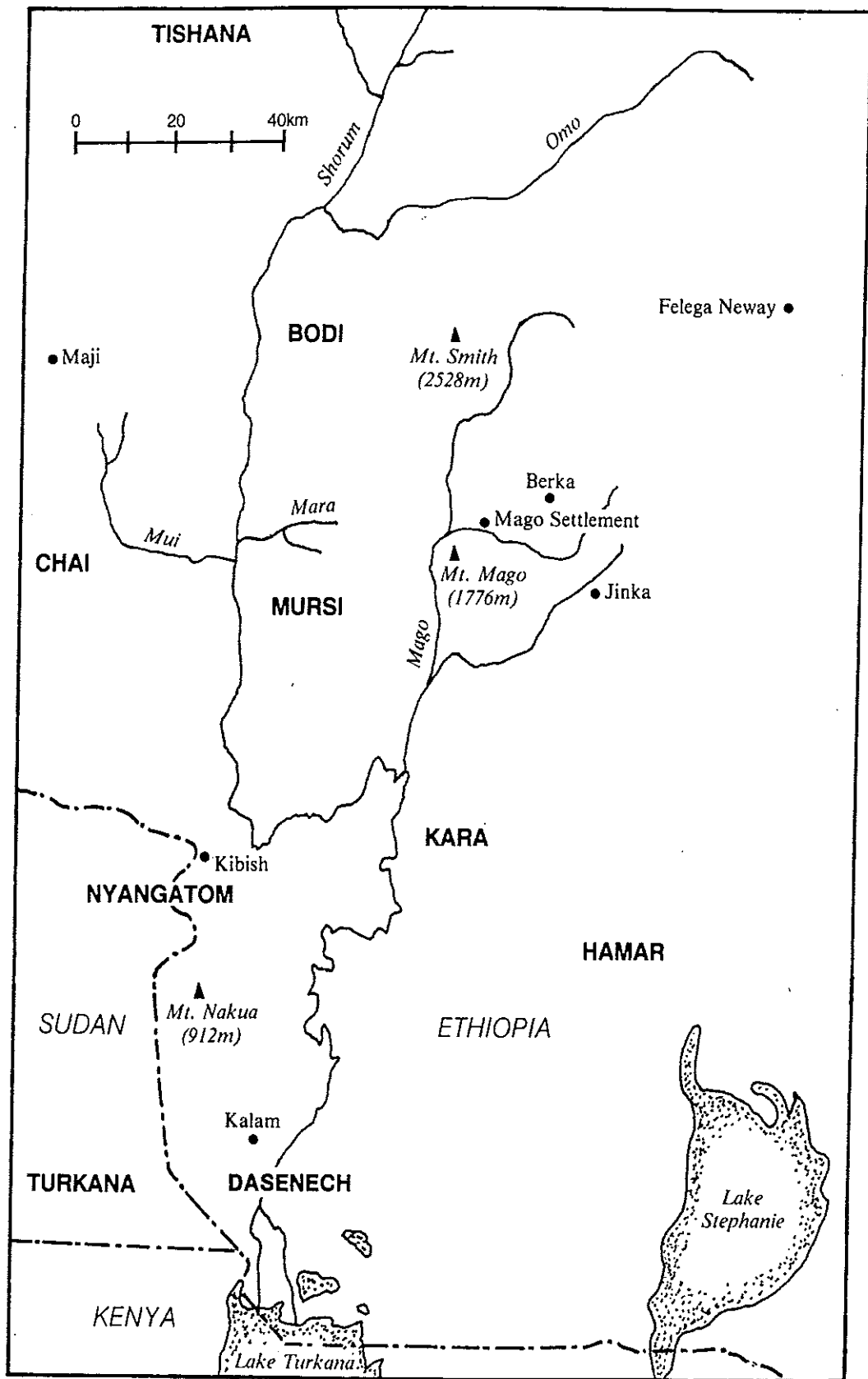
depends on the highly erratic local rainfall, and subject to falling crop yields as fallow periods are shortened in response to growing pressure on available land. Although pastoral products make a relatively small contribution to daily subsistence, cattle and small stock are a vital means of insurance against crop failure, since they can be exchanged for grain with neighbouring groups and in highland markets.

In any categorisation of societies into "peaceful" and "warlike", the Mursi would have to be included in the latter category. They have fundamentally hostile relations with all their herding neighbours, save the Chai (Surma) who live west of the Omo and south of Maji and with whom they intermarry and share a common language. Enemy groups can be divided into those with whom the Mursi are periodically at war but with whom they otherwise have relations of peaceful cooperation and economic exchange, and those with whom they have no peaceful contacts at all. The Bodi and Nyangatom belong to the first category and the Hamar, who live further away to the southeast, belong to the second (Figure 2). It is with enemies of the first category that warfare, when it occurs, is likely to be most violent and most disruptive of daily life (Turton, 1989). Attacks by the Hamar, normally in the form of cattle raids, are expected every year and are simply another source of uncertainty in a highly uncertain environment.

Since 1970 the Mursi have suffered a series of calamities comparable, in terms of human suffering and general social disruption, to those which affected large areas of north-eastern Africa at the turn of the century. Then it was rinderpest, smallpox, human sleeping sickness, drought, famine and the expansion of the Ethiopian state that did the damage; over the past twenty years it has been drought and famine, growing demographic pressure on subsistence resources and the spread of automatic weapons.

Between 1971 and 1973 the Mursi experienced a famine of such severity that people died of starvation for the first time in

Figure 2. *The Mursi and their neighbours*



living memory (Turton, 1977). Its precipitating cause was a failure of the main rains for three years in succession but its underlying, structural cause was a gradual worsening in their subsistence situation which had been taking place for most of this century. During this time they have become increasingly dependent on their least reliable means of subsistence, shifting cultivation (Turton, 1988).

The famine of the early seventies was greatly exacerbated by an intensification of armed conflict which affected all the herding peoples of the Lower Omo during these years (Tornay, 1979). For the Mursi, the most serious conflict was with the Bodi, with whom they had been on terms of peaceful cooperation for most of the previous twenty years (Turton, 1979). By the end of the decade, after further years of poor rainfall, a drought-induced migration had begun from northern Mursiland, to an area in the Mago Valley which had last been occupied (by the Bodi) about 70 years earlier (Figure 1). There was plenty of virtually untouched forest here for shifting cultivation and a highland market centre (Berka) only four hours' walk away. By 1983, despite the high tsetse challenge, which made the area quite unsuitable for cattle herding, there were around a thousand Mursi leading an essentially agricultural existence in the Mago Valley (Turton and Turton, 1984).

In the mid-eighties a new threat loomed for the Mursi, the origins of which lay in national, international and super-power politics: the acquisition by their south-western neighbours, the Nyangatom, of Kalashnikov automatic rifles. It seems that the main source of supply of these weapons for the Nyangatom were their friends and allies the Toposa, living in Equatoria Province in Sudan, who had in turn been supplied by the Sudan government as part of its policy of arming local "militias" to fight the Sudan People's Liberation Army (Tornay, 1993). In February 1987, a large force of Nyangatom, armed both with Kalashnikovs and the Mannlicher long rifles and carbines which have been common amongst all the peoples

of the Lower Omo since the end of the Second World War, killed several hundred Mursi in a single attack in the south of the country, the majority of those killed being women, girls and infants (Turton, 1989; Alvarsson 1989). This was the culmination of a series of tit-for-tat killings between Nyangatom and Mursi that had been going on over the previous two years (Tornay, 1993). The decision of the Nyangatom to use automatic weapons against the Mursi was taken after the particularly provocative and brutal killing of six Nyangatom who were staying as guests in a Mursi settlement at the Omo: they were shot and then hacked to death with bush knives.

Immediately after the Nyangatom attack, the Mursi evacuated the entire southern part of their territory. When I visited them in December 1987, they said it would be five years before they could hope permanently to reoccupy the land they had evacuated, and then only if they were able to acquire automatic weapons with which to make an equivalent attack on the Nyangatom. As it was, with no access to such weapons, they were expecting a second attack from the Nyangatom in the next few months when the Omo would once again be low enough to ford. Although the predicted second attack never came, the southern Mursi did not return to their cultivation sites along the Omo until the 1989-90 dry season, and then only under the duress of extreme hunger; nor did they stay longer than was necessary to take in the harvest.

At the same time, the migration to the Mago Valley had not only stopped but had reversed direction: in 1985 there were around 1000 Mursi living on both banks of the river, northeast of Mt Mago (Figure 1), but the population had fallen to about 150 by July 1990. This was mainly because the migrants' expectation that the tsetse challenge would reduce as land was cleared for cultivation proved over-optimistic. Another reason, however, was a series of "hit and run" attacks by Hamari (i.e. Hamar and/or their allies the Banna and Kara) from the south and east. Between April 1985 and July

1990, 27 Mursi were killed in such attacks in and around the Mago settlements.

In the 1990–91 dry season the southern Mursi again returned to their cultivation sites along the Omo and again stayed there only long enough to take in the harvest. They had good reason to feel under continued threat. Since 1987 the Nyangatom had found it increasingly easy to obtain automatic weapons from Sudan (Tornay, 1993) while the Mursi, being cut off from this source of supply by the Nyangatom, had to rely on their traditional links with Ethiopian arms dealers, operating from Berka and Jinka, who proved unable or unwilling to supply them with automatics. From what I was told at the time of my last visit in January 1991, only a handful of Mursi—certainly less than ten—had managed to acquire a Kalashnikov up to that time. I certainly saw no Mursi carrying one, while they were very much in evidence amongst the Nyangatom.

### Anthropological Approaches to Warfare: an impasse

The anthropological literature on warfare is ethnographically impressive but theoretically stultifying. Ferguson's comment that "anthropology has not yet made a great contribution to a general understanding of war and peace" (1984:1) smacks of deliberate understatement. In fact, one has the impression of careful scholarship and great ingenuity being employed to reach conclusions which are at best obvious (such as that most wars result in one group gaining access, not immediately or by conscious design, to resources formerly claimed by another) and at worst banal (such as that warfare occurs in the absence of institutions capable of preventing it). Both these propositions apply to the events described in the preceding section, but they hardly shed significant light on them. We must therefore consider briefly the questions being asked and the assumptions being made in the anthropological study of war.

Most anthropological writings on war can be classified roughly into two approaches, the political and the ecological. Although these are often written about as though they were contradictory, or at least competing, they have much in common where it matters most: in their basic assumptions.

Those anthropologists who adopt the political approach see warfare as an activity, *par excellence*, of "sovereign" political groups. These groups fight because it is in their very nature to do so and because they are not restrained by overarching institutions of social control. Sahlins, for example, describes *Warre* (in Hobbes's sense of the right and preparedness to use force) as the "unconscious" of tribal society: "...the objective organisation of tribal society may only be understood as the repressive transformation of an underlying anarchy" (1968:78) and "...descent groups push outward the sphere of *Warre*, at the minimum to some intergroup sector" (*op.cit.* 12). This approach clearly reflects both the Hobbesian assumption that a propensity for violence in pursuit of self-interest is a fact of human nature which it is the purpose of the state to keep in check, and the Durkheimian one that the source of peace and order in society is the moral authority exerted by the group over its members. The group, in this account, is simply the Hobbesian individual writ large.

Durkheim's solution to the problem of social order was, of course, specifically designed for societies that were defined as a residual class—namely those lacking the judicial and legal institutions characteristic of the state. The central problem for the structural functional tradition in anthropology, deriving from Durkheim, became social control: war did not need to be explained because it was simply the inevitable consequence of the lack of overarching mechanisms of social control—and ultimately of the state. The administrator quoted at the beginning of this chapter was not, therefore, being inconsistent when he said that the Mursi and their neighbours must be taught to be peaceful. His objection to their warlike behaviour was not that it was warlike but



that it represented an implicit challenge to the authority of the state. By fighting each other rather than the enemies of the state, they were challenging the right of the state to be the sole arbiter and instrument of legitimate force.

Ecological explanations of warfare have been subjected to intense debate and discussion, partly no doubt because warfare is a good case with which to argue about the validity of ecological explanations of social behaviour in general. The result is that ecologically minded anthropologists have produced increasingly qualified, complex and ingenious arguments about war as they have sought to deflect the arguments of their critics (Ferguson, 1984:22-37; 1990). Ferguson lists three defining "premises" of what he calls the "materialist" approach: that "causal primacy" is given to the "infrastructure"; that groups are in potential competition with each other; and that "wars occur when those who make the decision to fight estimate that it is in their material interest to do so" (1990:28-30). I think it would be fair to say that these may be reduced, without significant loss, to the single premise that warfare is always, in one way or another, the result of competition for scarce resources.

Like the political approach, then, this one presupposes that human beings are "programmed" to pursue their individual self-interest by violent means. And, also like the political approach, it takes for granted—in the sense that it does not regard as problematic—the existence of the groups which engage in this competition for scarce resources. The ecological approach, in other words, only works if the same assumption is made about groups as Hobbes made about individuals: that they exist independently of the relations between them. Hobbes's account of the origin of the state in a "social contract", entered into freely by self-interested individuals, was precisely one which did not presuppose the existence of other states. However, whereas Durkheimian sociology explicitly rejected Hobbes's assumption that it makes analytical sense to separate human beings from their social

relationships, it implicitly accepted the similar assumption he made about groups.

The questions being asked in the anthropological study of war, therefore, are about how to explain "war" as a universal feature of the human condition, manifesting itself in culturally specific forms. Such questions can only be asked from a position of cultural neutrality, the achievement of which anthropologists have traditionally seen as a necessary prerequisite of meaningful comparison—and as impossible. One of the best known statements of the paradox is Evans-Pritchard's remark, quoted by Needham (1975:365) that "There's only one method in social anthropology, the comparative method—and that's impossible". A recent formulation of the same paradox comes from Donham:

*...the special value of anthropology is its attempt to provide an Archimedean point outside the confines of any one cultural system in order that variation may be observed without prejudice. Whether or not such a point can finally be reached is debatable... (1990:8).*

From which it would seem to follow that the "special value" of anthropology is also "debatable".

Fortunately, however, and as Donham himself goes on to show, the "special value" of anthropology has nothing to do with "Archimedean" points. He continues, in the paragraph just quoted:

*...but minimally, the exercise of analysing another culture has the potential to free us from our own categories. We observe...no longer from within but from without. From this standpoint, some of what we have always accepted as natural turns into something strange, and seeing something as strange is a prerequisite of any fuller knowledge (loc. cit.).*

The search for "fuller", rather than complete, knowledge is the hallmark of science (as opposed to religion) and fuller knowledge in anthropology comes, as Donham shows here, not from the achievement of a culturally neutral position from which "variation may be observed without prejudice" but from the confrontation of culturally



specific ones. This is the only comparative method that is possible in social anthropology.

The brief account given above of "rival" anthropological approaches to the explanation of war suggests that the reason why these approaches have led to an impasse is that their proponents have mistaken a culturally specific position, summed up in the three assumptions stated at the beginning of this article, for an "Archimedean point"; that is, they have taken for granted certain cultural assumptions of their own about human nature and society as though these provided them with a legitimate basis, first for identifying war as a universal human phenomenon and then for comparing different examples of it. So far from converting "what we have always accepted as natural...into something strange", their unconscious effort has been to confirm the "naturalness" of what we knew—or rather thought we knew—already. It is fully to be expected, therefore, that their conclusions should turn out to be less than surprising.

If this is correct, it follows that the way to make progress with a genuinely comparative study of war—by which I mean one capable of surprising us with its conclusions—is to focus on indigenous conceptions of human nature and society. In the remainder of this article, therefore, I attempt to identify a collective Mursi view about what it means to be a human being and what it means to be Mursi. This is to assume, of course, that any human group, in any particular cultural setting, "has" such ideas (cf. Howell and Willis, 1989:19), but this is an "Archimedean point" I start from rather than aim at.

## On Being Human

When a Mursi wishes to refer to the essential quality which distinguishes human beings of both sexes and all ages from nonhuman animals, he or she uses the term *hiri* (pl. *zuo*). If a woman sees a movement in her stand of sorghum, for example, she

might call out, *anikangai o ani hiri?*, "Are you a baboon (*kangai*) or a human being?". Or if grain is found to have been taken from an *ulmai* (a grass covered container hidden in the branches of a tree) someone might say *ogorr hirio*, meaning that the signs are that it was stolen (*ogorr*) by a human being rather than by a baboon or monkey.

In such contexts, then, it seems appropriate to translate *hiri* as "human being" or "person". However the same word is also used in contexts which seem to require the translation "adult" or "grown up", as in *hiri ngau-a dole*, "She's not an adult, she's a girl (*dole*)" or *hiri ngau-a lusi*, "He's not an adult, he's a boy (*lusi*)". It is common also for someone of either sex to say *kani hiri*, in the same way that an English speaker might say "I am an adult", in order to stress his or her respect for social norms and general moral rectitude.

There are two standard Mursi examples of lack of respect for social norms: leaving one's shit in a public or domestic space, such as on a pathway or within the compound fence of a settlement, and stealing the property of another Mursi. The first is quintessentially asocial behaviour and, as such, is expected only of an untrained child: if one sees human shit on a path, it must be a child's. The second is more obviously anti-social, being a deliberate and purposeful act which disadvantages another in order to advantage oneself. The standard counter-example of behaviour that exemplifies respect for social norms is the hospitable treatment of guests. Being an adult (*hiri*) means identifying with, being alert to and looking after the needs of others. It also means not showing open indignation if others fail to treat you according to the same norms. These are the qualities that are listed if one asks, in a general way, how a person, male or female, should behave in everyday life.

There should be no disagreement, then, between a Mursi and English speaker about the behaviour expected of an adult, but whereas English allows us, by the use of this word, to separate the socially valued

qualities of the individual from his or her "human nature", the Mursi speaker has no such option: he or she is forced to define "human" in terms of those very qualities. Thus the phrase "He's only human" can be used in English to explain or excuse some moral failing, or at least a falling short of an ideal of proper behaviour, on the grounds that "what more can you expect from such a basically flawed creature as a human being?" The same phrase in Mursi (*a hiri song*) would be as contradictory, as an explanation of moral failure, as "He's only an adult" would be in English. The only appropriate use I can think of for "He's only human" in Mursi (although it is not one I can remember having heard) would be to stress a morally neutral limitation, whether physical or mental, of the human species, as in "He can't live under water, he's only human".

Another way of describing the consequences of this difference between Mursi and English usage would be to say that, in Mursi, it is not possible to consider human beings apart from their social relationships: they are social from the start. The concept of human nature, on the other hand, which provides the premise for all Hobbesian and therefore most anthropological explanations of warfare, is based precisely on such a separation. According to the editors of a recent collection of essays on "societies at peace" (Howell and Willis, 1989), this is a characteristically Western way of thinking about what it means to be human.

*Members of most non-Western societies regard themselves as the most superior form of being, in possession of the most desirable qualities. Westerners, on the other hand, attribute to themselves many characteristics they most dislike and, moreover, grant these a powerful explanatory role...William Golding's novel, Lord of the Flies...is seen as an example of the innately brutal characteristics of humans. Schoolboys reveal themselves as having only a thin veneer of "civilisation" which, once the constraints of authority are removed, disappears, laying bare their "true nature", which is violent, domineering and*

*competitive...Such theories take the individual as the starting point; ...As becomes clear from most of the papers in this collection, this particular view of human nature is not shared by many other societies...(op.cit. 10).*

My only quarrel—some might say quibble—with this, based upon the Mursi case, is that the distinction in question is not between two views of human nature but between two views of the human individual, one of which accords him or her a human "nature" and one of which does not. For the concept of human nature is the simple consequence of separating the individual from his or her social relationships, a separation which, as I have explained, cannot be made by a Mursi speaker. What is distinctive about the Western view of human nature, then, is the concept of human nature itself. It is instructive to compare this concept with what the Mursi call *hiri-mo*, "the state of being adult/human". The main, and possibly only, context in which I have heard this word used is that of male age set ritual, of which a brief outline is therefore required at this point.

By becoming a member of an age set, a man moves from the grade of *teri* to that of *rori*, the principal privilege that comes with this change in status being the right to play a full part in public life. The *rora* (plural form) may therefore be called, in the standard anthropological terminology, "junior elders". The creation of a new set has the effect of moving the previous set from the *rori* to the *bari* grade. Members of the *bari* grade may therefore be called "elders", and it is they who are responsible for creating the next set in the series. This is done by means of a three-day ritual, called *nitha*. Each of the three main territorial units (*buranyoga*) into which the population is divided and which are named, from south to north, Gongulobibi, Ariholi and Dola, holds its own *nitha*, in relatively quick succession and according to a fixed order. Ariholi takes the lead, because its territorial focus, Kurum, is considered (for reasons to be explained later) the historical "centre" of Mursiland, and is followed by Gongulobibi and then Dola. In January 1991

I spent two weeks at Kurum with a film crew from Granada TV of Manchester in order to film the first *nitha* to have been held for thirty years (Woodhead, 1991a; 1991b). The creation of the new set, which was given the name Geleba, was completed by August that year, when the Dola *nitha* was held.

In becoming a member of an age set a man also moves, *ipso facto*, from the state of being a boy (*lusi-mo*) to that of being an adult (*hiri-mo*), even though, because of the interval that can elapse between the formation of successive sets, he may be well into his forties at the time. In this context, then, *hiri-mo* seems to refer to a stage in the male life cycle which many members of the new set are likely to have already reached, *de facto*, through the process of biological ageing. It is easy, therefore, to translate it simply as "adulthood" and to ignore the fact that it can also mean, simply by reason of its linguistic construction, "the state of being human". I think this would be to misrepresent the Mursi view.

One of the main features of the *nitha* is the beating of members of the new age set with long thin branches. The men who do the beating are members of the immediately senior age set (the new *bara*) which was formed at the last *nitha*. When, during the *nitha* we filmed in January 1991, I asked a group of these men to explain the practice, they said that those being formed into the new age set were "taking" their *hiri-mo*, and that this was so special and "powerful" (*barari*) that they were not prepared to part with it without a show of resistance. One of the men explained this "specialness" by repeating the following, no doubt standard, aphorism.

If a child shits on the path, one says "That's human shit" (*ani hiriny*) If a woman steals some sorghum, one says "A human being took it" (*ogorr hirio*).

The fact that this was considered an appropriate commentary on the ritual beating of the new *rora* suggests that *hiri-mo*, even when used in the context of male age set ritual, refers not (or not only) to a stage in the male lifecycle, adulthood, but to the state of being

human. It was clear, furthermore, that the need for *hiri-mo* to be ritually handed over to a new generation of men through the *nitha* was a deeply held assumption of my informants, without which the concept itself would have been meaningless. When I suggested to them (in answer to their queries about the age status of the film crew) that, in our country, we "just take" *hiri-mo* from our fathers, they treated this as a pronouncement so outrageous that it was best not to discuss it further. (The exchange reported here is shown in the film *Nitha* (Woodhead, 1991b).

Viewed in this light, the *nitha* is a "communicative act" which makes explicit the social preconditions of human existence. It says that the defining characteristic of "the state of being human" is the capacity for social behaviour, or "sociality" (Carrithers, 1989), and that human beings do not, therefore, exist independently of their social relationships. It follows that the Mursi concept *hiri-mo* is the exact opposite of the English concept "human nature". The first focuses on what distinguishes human beings from animals, namely the capacity for social behaviour, which needs to be encouraged and nurtured by society, while the second focuses on what links human beings to animals, namely the capacity for violent, aggressive and self interested behaviour, which needs to be curbed and controlled by society.

## On Being Mursi

I take as my starting point in this section a prediction made to me by a Mursi in December 1987, as we discussed the likelihood of the Nyangatom launching a second attack, on a par with the massacre of ten months earlier. If such an attack came, he said, it would be the end of the Mursi, not in the sense that they would be wiped out as a physical population but in the sense they would lose their identity as Mursi. This would come about because they would be

forced to abandon their present territory altogether and seek refuge in the highlands, on either side of the Omo Valley. They would survive there as individuals, in scattered enclaves, and their clan names would persist, but they would no longer be Mursi.

A clan (*kabi*) is an exogamous category of the population, based on putative descent from a common agnatic ancestor. An exhaustive listing of the clan affiliations of the present Mursi population would result in about a dozen clans, five of which are accorded a special status on account of their origin at a place called *Thaleb*. This is a mythical place of origin in the sense that it is where the members of these clans first appeared on the earth, having been brought down from the sky by a dog. *Thaleb* is located far away to the southeast but cannot be identified, either by the Mursi themselves or an outside observer, with any known place. The five "core" clans reached present day Mursi territory after migrating in an anti-clockwise direction from *Thaleb* and "finding" and forming affinal alliances with other clans *en route*. It is important to note that these five clan names are not exclusive to the Mursi but are also found, according to the Mursi, amongst the Chai and Tirma (both collectively called *Surma* (Abbink, 1991:8)) who live west of the Omo and south of Maji, towards and beyond the border with Sudan.

Mursi occupation of their present territory, from the west bank of the Omo, began less than two hundred years ago. This is clear from answers to the question "Which of your ancestors was the first to be born on the east bank of the Omo?" The first area occupied was around Kurum, which is why this is now regarded as the historical "centre" of Mursiland. The area between Kurum and the River Mara, the current boundary between the Mursi and their northern neighbours, the Bodi, was occupied in stages, over the course of this century (Turton, 1988). That the Mursi occupied their present territory from the west is supported not only by oral history but also by linguistic evidence: the Mursi and Surma languages are mutually

intelligible but they differ phonetically in ways which suggest that Mursi is derived from Surma, rather than vice versa.

In his study of the "ethnic origins" of European nations, Anthony Smith (1986) singles out "myths of origin and descent" as the "*sine qua non* of ethnicity" (*ibid.* 24). Among the other defining characteristics of the *ethnie* (ethnic group) he lists is "association with a specific territory". This choice of words is dictated by the need to include cases where the ethnic group has been dispersed from its homeland.

*Ethnie do not cease to be ethnie when they are dispersed...for ethnicity is a matter of myths, memories, values and symbols and not of material possessions and political power, both of which require a habitat for their realisation...poetic and symbolic qualities possess greater potency than everyday attributes; a land of dreams is far more significant than any actual terrain (ibid. 28).*

If *Thaleb* is the Mursi "land of dreams", it cannot, however, be seen as the territorial basis of Mursi identity. For it is not only Mursi clans which claim this origin and members of clans which do not claim it are nevertheless fully Mursi. Mursi identity is based, rather, on the relatively recent occupation of an "actual terrain", Kurum, and the subsequent "colonisation" of the area between Kurum and the River Mara. It is clear that the Mursi think of their specifically Mursi identity, unlike their clan identities, as recent, impermanent and problematic. I shall call this political rather than ethnic identity because it is created by, and linked indissoluble to, the occupation of a specific territory. Clan identities, which are more permanent because not territorially based, seem to qualify better for the ethnic label. In short, it is possible for someone to imagine losing his or her Mursi identity, but not his or her clan identity.

Being a Mursi, then, means, first and foremost, being a member of a specific politico-territorial group, but the identity which comes from such membership is constructed and problematic, not "natural" or "primordial". How then is it constructed?

A convenient way to approach this question is to consider the three *buranyoga* (singular *buran*), or territorial divisions, into which the Mursi population, which is also called a *buran*, is divided and of which they are considered replicas. This terminological identification suggests that relations between the constituent *buranyoga* of the Mursi *buran* are conceived of as in some way similar to relations between the Mursi and neighbouring groups such as the Bodi and Nyangatom, which are, of course, also *buranyoga*.

Of the three *buranyoga* into which the Mursi *buran* is divided, Dola is by far the largest, in terms both of territory and population and is further divided into three smaller *buranyoga*. These territorial divisions are cross-cut by ties of clanship, affinity and economic cooperation and exchange which ramify throughout the population. The only context in which the lines between one *buran* and another are regularly and visibly drawn is in that of stick-fighting or, as I prefer to call it, ceremonial duelling.

Duelling contests are held two or three times a year between teams of men representing different *buranyoga*. There is not space here to describe the rules of duelling (Turton, 1978) but the essential point is that it makes visible and, in this sense, *creates* separate political identities against a background of close knit and widely ramifying social ties which work against the drawing of clear-cut and exclusive divisions in everyday life. Duelling, furthermore, is an integral part of men's ritual life, it being fostered, organised, and controlled through the age set system. It should be remembered also that each of the three main *buranyoga* holds its own *nitha*, in quick and coordinated succession, to create a new age set.

If the political subdivisions of the Mursi population are the "product" of ritualised male violence, it seems logical to expect that Mursi political identity itself will be similarly constructed—that is, through the ritualised male violence we call warfare. In pursuing this suggestion I am indebted to Simon Harrison's impressive analysis of warfare

at Avatip in Papua New Guinea in an as yet unpublished monograph from which he has kindly allowed me to quote.

The suggestion that relations between groups may be seen as defining their boundaries is hardly new in anthropology. Harrison cites Roy Wagner's analysis of Daribi clan structure (1967) as having made a key contribution to the idea that exchange serves to create—that is, define the boundaries of—groups rather than to link already existing ones.

*The apparently patrilineal clans are in fact wholly contingent outcomes of their members' gift transactions. Exchange, in this society, does not serve to link groups but to create them. Through their exchanges, groups are constantly working to extract themselves from each other* (Harrison, in press:16).

I have made a similar point about Mursi bridewealth transactions, arguing that it would be "circular to interpret the payment of bridewealth as compensating a group of agnates for the loss of a sister or daughter", when it is the payment of bridewealth which makes them a group "in the first place" (Turton, 1980:73). A further indication that Wagner's, "Daribi model" may travel well to Africa comes from Wendy James's explanation of Uduk matriliney:

*Where transactions over what is seen as the natural birthline of descent from mother to daughter (typically marriage transactions) are suspended, or are made impossible for some historical reason, this line may itself emerge as the dominant principle of public jural organisation. "Matriliney" may thus suddenly appear on the map* (1978:158).

Matrilineal relations, in other words, are seen as "given", while patrilineal ones are not. Patrilineal groups therefore have to be purposefully constructed and are in constant "danger" of "collapsing" into matriliney, the underlying "stuff" of social life.

Harrison has simply extended this line of reasoning to relations between politico-territorial groups. Divisions between these groups also have to be purposefully constructed and are in constant danger of



"collapsing" into a kind of generalised, taken for granted "sociality".

*To these [Melanesian] societies, war is not the symptom of a failure or absence of an overarching order of normative constraints. Rather, peaceful sociality within and between communities is taken for granted. But because it is taken for granted, the only way that bounded groups can be created is by purposive action against that sociality (Harrison, in press:214).*

The "problem of order" for Avatip men is, consequently, how to maintain appropriate levels of hostility" (Harrison, 1989:592).

*War, and the ritual ethic of war, were means used purposefully by men to construct a political identity for their community in the first place, not just as a physical population secure from extermination, but more basically as a conceptual entity free from the normative claims of outsiders... They fought and fostered war in their cult, not because they lacked normative ties beyond the village but, quite the opposite, precisely because they had such ties and could only define themselves as a polity by acting collectively to overcome and transcend them (Harrison, in press:215-6, emphasis in the original).*

If we substitute "duelling" for "warfare", this interpretation would fit well the case of duelling between the constituent political units, or *buranyoga*, of the Mursi *buran*. This encourages me to think that it is worth applying the same interpretation to the external relations of the Mursi.

These certainly do not exclude "normative ties" with their principal enemies of the past twenty years, the Bodi and Nyangatom. Indeed the northern and southern Mursi respectively have close ties of daily contact and economic cooperation with members of these neighbouring groups, as the incident that sparked the Nyangatom attack of February 1987 illustrates. The six Nyangatom guests who were hacked to death in a Mursi settlement had come to purchase grain, a frequent item of exchange between Mursi and Nyangatom in times of hunger. This was, in Harrison's terms, the Mursi acting to "overcome and transcend" their norma-

tive ties with the Nyangatom, in the name of Mursi political identity. Unfortunately (for both groups) the Nyangatom responded with an even more drastic denial of these normative claims, thanks to their possession of automatic weapons.

When I visited the Mursi in December 1987, there was no doubt that they wanted an end to a situation of great insecurity which was having seriously adverse consequences for economic production. Most serious of all, for the southern Mursi, was that they had abandoned their flood retreat cultivation sites along the banks of the Omo from Kurum southwards, but the only way they could see of ending this insecurity was through an attack on the Nyangatom comparable in scale to the Nyangatom attack on them. This meant that it would have to be a *kaman*—a daylight attack involving a large number of men—rather than a *luhai*—a night-time or early morning raid by one or two (Turton, 1991:167-8). It also was equally important that the Mursi war party should be armed with at least some automatic weapons. They said they would be ready to mount a "return match" (the analogy with "home" and "away" duelling contests was explicitly used) even if they had as few as ten automatics. When I objected that this could mean many more Mursi than Nyangatom deaths I was told that this did not matter: the survivors would still be able to make a secure peace.

Like duelling, warfare is a specifically male activity which men engage in as members of a ritually defined category of the population—an age grade or set. For the Mursi as for the Avatip, "there is no equation of war with nature and peace with culture, but instead an equation of war with men's ritual life and peace with everyday secular life" (Harrison, 1989:594). If age set ritual is to the Mursi what the men's cult is to the Avatip—the institutional focus of their political identity—this would help to explain both the timing and location of the *nitha* held at Kurum in January 1991.

When, on previous visits, I had asked about delays in forming the next age set I

had most frequently been told that such an important ritual could not be held "when the land is bad". And yet social and environmental conditions could hardly have been less propitious than they were in January 1991. There was a feeling of great insecurity, not simply because the ritual was held under the eyes of the Nyangatom, as they sported their Kalashnikovs on the opposite bank of the Omo, but also because of recent attacks from the east by the Hammar/Banna. These attacks meant that many men and boys who should have attended the *nitha* at Kurum did not do so, preferring to guard their cattle in the eastern grazing areas. Food was in short supply since both the recent flood harvest and the 1990 rain-fed harvest had been poor and, only five months earlier, perhaps as many as 200 people had died in a meningitis epidemic that particularly affected the southern Mursi. Yet there is no paradox here if the *nitha* is seen as an assertion of Mursi political identity.

The main events of the *nitha* take place in and around a specially constructed enclosure of branches (*dir.*) with a tree at its centre and two openings, one opposite the other. The enclosure at Kurum was built around a young tree, about six feet tall, which not only looked highly unimpressive but which also afforded very little shade for the small group of elders (*bara*) who had to spend many hours in the enclosure on the first day of the ritual. The choice, however, was deliberate. A young tree was chosen because it had a long life ahead of it and would therefore "grow up" with the members of the new age set. Being thus explicitly identified with the tree, they were also identified with the place where the tree was rooted. In future, the fact that the *nitha* had been held at Kurum, a fact concretely symbolised by the tree, could be used to validate Mursi claims to this "actual terrain" which they had evacuated after the 1987 massacre and which was still considered too insecure for permanent occupation. The *nitha* was held *when* it was because Mursi identity was under severe threat and it was

held *where* it was because of the essential link between Mursi identity and the "actual terrain" of Kurum.

## Conclusion

The Mursi do not share the Hobbesian assumption that human beings are fundamentally competitive and prone to violence. The concept of human nature is not available to them as an explanation of violence and war and they do not, therefore, see peace as a triumph of social control over the "natural" propensity to aggression of individuals and groups. For the Mursi and their neighbours war is a common ritual language by which they make themselves significant to each other and to themselves as independent political entities; it is not primarily a means by which an already constituted group seeks to extend or defend its territory, but a means by which the very idea of it as an independent political unit, "free from the normative claims of outsiders" (Harrison, *in press*, p. 215) and therefore able to extend or defend its territory, is created and kept alive.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>This article is reprinted from T. Tvedt (ed.), *Conflicts in the Horn of Africa: human and ecological consequences of warfare*. Uppsala: EPOS (Research Programme on Environmental Policy and Society, Uppsala University), 1993.

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