

THE POLITICIAN, THE PRIEST AND THE ANTHROPOLOGIST: LIVING BEYOND CONFLICT IN SOUTHWESTERN ETHIOPIA¹

David Turton

In an article entitled ‘Some Problems in African Conflict Resolution’ (2001), which was first published in Danish in 1995, Bernhard Helander identified two obstacles to successful conflict resolution in contemporary Africa. First, a preference for top-down, centralised approaches by international organisations and, second, a failure to take into account the way local conflicts are linked to wider processes of environmental and political change. He notes that, although anthropologists are well placed to explore such linkages, they have seldom attempted to do so. ‘One may note’, he says, ‘the absence of studies that combine small-scale focus with an awareness of the larger structures that local communities are linked to’ (p.6).² I am going to take my cue from these comments. Using a case of violent conflict drawn from recent fieldwork amongst the Mursi of southwestern Ethiopia, I shall look at what Bernhard calls, in the same article, the ‘extremely complex area’ of the ‘interfaces between more inclusive national politics and local interests’ (p. 3). Because this *is* such a complex area, and because I cannot possibly present an account that will be valid for ‘local interests’ as a whole, I shall concentrate on two key Mursi individuals, whom I call the Politician and the Priest. Neither of them were directly involved in the violence, but both were deeply involved in efforts to find a way of ‘living beyond’ it.

I begin by - very briefly - setting the national scene. I then give background information about the Mursi and summarise the main facts of the case of violent conflict I shall be concentrating on. In the next section I introduce my two main characters and follow their efforts at conflict resolution over a six-week period in January and February 2001. Next I draw some conclusions about the interplay of national and local political processes and, finally, discuss my own involvement in the case, and some of the questions it raises about the analysis of violent conflict as an ‘involved outsider’ (Hermann, 2001).

The national scene: the remapping of Ethiopia under the EPRDF

Ethiopia provides a particularly interesting context within which to consider the interplay of national and local political processes. This is because, over the past ten

¹ This is the first Bernhard Helander Memorial Lecture, delivered in the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University on 6 June 2002. Bernhard Helander, one of the foremost Somali scholars of his generation, died of cancer in 2001 at the age of 43. The lecture has subsequently appeared in *Ethnos*, 68:1, 2003, pp. 5-26.

² There have been some notable recent exceptions to this, at least for southern Ethiopia. See for example, Donham (1999), Abbink (2000) and the chapters in James et al. (2002). The latter work builds on an earlier collection of essays (Donham and James, 1986) which ‘demonstrated the ways in which the interpretation of local case material must proceed in relation to an understanding of wider historical contexts’ (Donham, 2002, p. 1)

years, it has been ‘re-mapped’ as a decentralised ethnic confederation. This was intended to increase the independence and autonomy of localised, ethnically defined populations, whose relationship to the state had formerly been defined along centre-periphery lines. According to Christopher Clapham, the previous, Soviet-backed government of Mengistu Haile Mariam, known as the Derg, represented this centre-periphery conceptualisation of Ethiopia ‘in its most intense form’ (2002, p. 14).

The Derg pursued a policy of centralised state-formation and top-down development which Clapham calls *encadrement*, or ‘incorporation into structures of control’ (op.cit. p. 14). The policy was pushed ‘to its self-destructive limits, rapidly resulting in the reversal of an apparently ineluctable process of centralised state formation that stretched back to the accession of Emperor Tewodros in 1855’ (op. cit., p. 23). Mengistu was finally overthrown by an alliance of opposition movements, led by the Tigrayan Peoples’ Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1991. The TPLF dominated the new government, and continues to do so to this day, through its control of the ruling coalition of ethnically based parties, the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

The new ‘Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia’ is divided into nine ‘national regional states’, each with its own elected assembly. One of the most dramatic and visible consequences of the new policy of ethnic federalism was the sudden appearance in government offices of officials and administrators drawn from the local educated elite. Especially in the south, these were people who, under the previous centralising regimes of the Derg and *its* predecessor, the imperial regime of the Emperor Haile Selassie, would have had to compete with better educated northerners. It is by no means certain, however, that the new constitution has led to a general reduction in the intrusion of state power at the local level. Indeed, for the Mursi, it appears to have increased it.

The local scene: conflict between the Mursi and the Aari

The Mursi number about 6000 and live in the Omo Valley, roughly between the Omo and its tributary, the Mago and about 100 km north of the border between Ethiopia and Kenya. [MAP] They are often described by government officials as ‘nomads’, who are constantly on the move, ‘hanging on to the tails of their cattle’. In fact, they depend for well over half their subsistence needs on cultivation, their main crops being sorghum and maize, and their seasonal movements are limited in extent and highly regular. The nearest administrative centre is Hana, which is about 40 km to the north, in the territory of another group, the Bodi. The Mursi and the Bodi speak different languages, do not intermarry and are frequently in conflict. Two days walk to the east there is a much larger administrative and market centre, Jinka. Apart from government offices, Jinka has a hospital, a prison, several hotels and an airstrip from which Ethiopian Airlines provides a twice-weekly flight to Addis Ababa.

At the end of the 1970s, drought and hunger led to an eastward migration from northern Mursiland to higher, unoccupied land in the Mago Valley where several hundred Mursi now live. This area offered good prospects for cultivation and gave the migrants easier access to highland markets which have become for the Mursi, as for other drought-affected populations in Africa, a key resource in surviving periods of food shortage. But the move led to increased friction between the Mursi and their

agricultural neighbours, the Aari who considered that the migrants had encroached on their territory. This was not denied by the Mursi, who see themselves, unashamedly, as an expansionary and pioneering people.

Meanwhile, as automatic weapons started to make their appearance in the Lower Omo Valley in the late 1980s, the Mursi came under increasing pressure from their equally expansionary southern neighbours, the Nyangatom. In February 1987, several hundred Mursi, the majority of them women and children, were killed in a single attack by Nyangatom, armed with recently acquired automatic rifles, in the southern part of Mursi territory. This led to an immediate evacuation of Mursi villages and cultivation sites along the Omo and, although these were later re-occupied, relations between the Mursi and the Nyangatom have remained tense ever since. The Mursi, who did not begin to acquire automatic weapons themselves until 1992, say that the Nyangatom are still much better armed, having easier access both to weapons and ammunition.

Since the Mursi moved to the Mago Valley there have been two major outbreaks of violence between them and the Aari. Both followed the same pattern: a single Mursi was killed in the vicinity of an Aari village, after which retaliatory attacks were launched on settlements close to the scene of the killing. The first of these incidents occurred in 1991, when a Mursi man was shot and killed on his way to the market in the Aari village of Berka. In the retaliatory attacks that followed this killing, around fifty Aari were killed and two young Aari girls were kidnapped.³ The second incident, which is the one that concerns me here, took place in January 1999.

On 1 January 1999, a young Mursi wife, Kereramai, was speared to death by an Aari man as she slept with her one-year old child at an Aari settlement, on her way home from attending the market in the nearby village of Balamer.⁴ The child was not killed but left, as one Mursi put it, 'swimming in his mother's blood'. Over the next two days, a number of Mursi men, age mates of Kereramai's husband, attacked Balamer (where many people had taken refuge in the police station) and surrounding settlements, killing between 30 and 40 men, women and children. The normal response of the authorities to such an event would have been to broker a meeting between the two sides, at which compensation to be paid by the Mursi, and the return of stolen property, would have been discussed. This was the procedure followed after the earlier Mursi retaliation against the Aari, in 1991. On this occasion, however, the authorities did not proceed in this way, nor did they attempt to arrest the men who had taken part in the attack (which would have been an impossible task). Instead, they demanded that the men simply hand themselves over to the police. Only then would it be possible for peaceful relations to be re-established between the two groups and for the migrants to regain access to the markets in Balamer and Berka.

This reaction from the government, which effectively by-passed traditional

³ They were 'adopted' by Mursi families but later returned, on the insistence of the authorities, to their own, Aari families.

⁴ It seems that the man had been involved, while under the influence of drink, in an argument with a Mursi woman in the market on the previous day, during which the police had intervened on behalf of the Mursi. I am not sure whether Kereramai was the woman in question.

methods of conflict resolution between the Mursi and the Aari, represented probably the most significant intrusion of state power into the political space and historical consciousness of the Mursi that they had ever known. This is not because of its immediate impact on the Mursi but, as I shall show later, because of what it implied about the changed power relationship between the Mursi, their highland neighbours and the Ethiopian state. In order to show how this intrusion was experienced by the Mursi, I now need to shift the focus of my account away from ‘the Mursi’, as a supposedly homogeneous group, and introduce my two principal characters, the Politician and the Priest.

The Politician and the Priest

In early 1996, a four-month course for trainee administrators was held in Awassa, the capital of the southern region – the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Region – of which the area occupied by the Mursi forms part. There was one Mursi amongst the 250 participants in this course, and this was the man I have been calling the Politician. From now on I shall call him by his family name, Bedameri.

Bedameri was the obvious choice to attend the Awassa course. He was one of the very few Mursi who could speak Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, and the only one who could read and write – even if imperfectly. In fact, he had not had a formal education. He had picked up his knowledge of Amharic, and his literacy skills, while detained in Jinka prison, during his late teens, having been wrongly accused of cattle theft. He was released from prison after two and a half years (he was not charged or sentenced) and set about building up his cattle wealth in order to marry. By the time he joined the course for trainee administrators in Awasa in 1996, he had two wives and had become a respected and valued member of his local community. He was based at Hana, with the title Vice-Chairman of the Sub-district Council, a post he continued to hold until his death, earlier this year, at the age of 48 or 49. By then, he was earning a salary of 800 Ethiopian Birr, or \$90 per month.

I was present at the first speech he made, to a large gathering of Mursi men, when he returned from Awassa in May 1996. The message he had for his audience was simple: the traditional Mursi way of dealing with the Ethiopian state – disengagement and isolationism – was no longer viable. If they continued to adopt this strategy, they would reinforce the ignorance and prejudice of a government that already regarded them as the most anarchic, warlike, and generally ‘difficult’ people in the area. ‘You should see’, he said, ‘the huge pile of letters and reports about us in Awasa’.

We must be a very powerful people. Whenever word comes of a problem – such as the theft of cattle or grain or the killing of people – we are always held responsible. No other group is named – only the Mursi. How can this be? How are we able to cause all this trouble? Are we not black, like our neighbours? Or do we have aeroplanes and motor cars? The trouble is, the government knows nothing about us.

It was up to the Mursi, he said, to change this situation by keeping in touch with the government, reporting any problems and co-operating with its demands. Here, he was preaching the EPRDF’s doctrine of local responsibility and political empowerment, which he summed up in a Mursi phrase meaning ‘the land must be looked after by its owners’. But he also gave the contradictory warning that the government would not

leave the Mursi alone to run their own affairs as they saw fit. To bring this point home, he referred to the firm measures that had recently been taken by the EPRDF's military forces against a group of Tsamai, in the Wayto Valley, east of Jinka, who had been resisting the expropriation of their land for an irrigated cotton farm. Bedameri's double-pronged message had far reaching implications for one member of his audience in particular, namely my other principal character, the Priest.

The Priest occupies an inherited office which can be called 'politico-religious'. On the one hand, he connects the contingent world of human beings to Tumwi, a source of necessary, absolute power, identified with the sky. On the other hand, he embodies the traditional norms and values upon which the social order and internal harmony of the community depends, and he therefore symbolises, in his own person, its political identity and historical continuity. His mere presence within the community is felt to be essential to its well-being. The crops will not flourish, for example, unless planting is initiated by the Priest and he should drive his cattle before those of others when the group is migrating into a new area.

The present Priest in northern Mursiland⁵, Komorakora, is now in his late 60s. He succeeded to the position over thirty years ago, somewhat unexpectedly, following the early death of his older brother. I first met him in 1969, when I began my work amongst the Mursi. He was then regarded very much as a neophyte and he depended heavily on the advice and instruction of older men. Over the years, however, he has come to be regarded not only as a powerful ritual figure, but also as an experienced and influential voice in the conduct of public affairs. Probably the biggest decision he has had to make in his career so far was to lead the migration to the Mago Valley.

The Mursi first began to experience the periodic incursions of military forces, European explorers and government officials in the early years of this century, when the Emperor Menelik was establishing his control over what became the southwestern provinces of Ethiopia. The response of Mursi priests to these incursions was to have as little to do with them as possible and this became the standard response of the Mursi as a whole – to keep their collective heads down and wait for the crisis to pass, as it usually did. But since the fall of Haile Selassie in 1974, and the coming to power of the Derg, the encroachment of the state has become more persistent and effective, and Komorakora has been forced to engage with it in a more direct way than any of his predecessors. This process of ever-closer engagement with the state accelerated under the apparently decentralising regime of the EPRDF. The best illustration of this to date is provided by the, in the end, doomed attempts of Bedameri and Komorakora to resolve the Mursi-Aari conflict of January 1999 in accordance with the conditions laid down by the government.

The 'boys' give themselves up

In December 2000, Bedameri and Komorakora were summoned to a meeting at the Council offices in Jinka. Nearly two years had passed since the Mursi attack on the Aari, and the men⁶ involved had still not given themselves up. The administration had

⁵ Two priests are currently in office, one in the north and one in the south of the country. Both come from the same priestly clan, Komorte.

⁶ Although they were nearly all in their twenties, the Mursi referred to them as 'boys'

now decided that the Mursi were simply not taking their demands seriously and that Bedameri, whom they had been relying on as their sole means of communication with the Mursi, was at least partly to blame for this. Since the message was not having the desired effect, the messenger must have been passing it on with insufficient forcefulness. A new approach was necessary.

The new approach was to bypass Bedameri and talk directly to a large and representative gathering of Mursi men in Hana, at which they would be left in no doubt of the seriousness of the government's intentions. Bedameri was instructed to ensure that 60 men from different local divisions of Mursiland assembled in Hana within the next few days. It happened that I arrived in Jinka at this time, to begin a two month period of fieldwork, helping to make a documentary film for television (Woodhead, 2001). Over this period, then, I was able to follow the twists and turns of the story which became, in fact, the main theme of the film.

Within three days of returning to Mursiland, Bedameri had recruited a party of the desired size and composition. Before they set off, a public meeting, or debate,⁷ was held to discuss how they should respond to the demands the government representatives were expected to make when they reached Hana. All those who spoke accepted the seriousness of the situation and that, if at least some of the 'boys' did not give themselves up, violent reprisals were likely against the Mursi as a whole. Several speakers alluded to the tactics of 'exemplary terror' that had been employed in recent years by the EPRDF's 'Rapid Response Force', against neighbouring groups whose members were accused of raiding highland villages for cattle and grain. If a man was seen carrying a rifle, for example, he would be told to stop and place his rifle on the ground. He would then be shot dead, even if he was accompanied by a woman or child, and the rifle left lying across the corpse. In mid-1999 an elaborate subterfuge was used in a co-ordinated operation against groups living north of the Mursi, on both sides of the Omo. Two camps were established, one to the east and one to the west of the Omo and the local people were encouraged to bring milk and honey to sell to the troops. The next day, after a number of people had gathered with these items, they were shot down in a hail of bullets, the same action being taken simultaneously in both locations, by means of radio communication.

The details of these events were well known to the audience and did not need to be emphasised. The main issue discussed by the speakers was how to persuade a sufficient number of men who had taken part in the January 1999 attack to give themselves up – sufficient, that is, to satisfy the government, although no-one seemed to know how many that would turn out to be. The problem was that neither Bedameri nor Komorakora, nor the community leaders in general, had any means of coercion at their disposal. Although the identities of those who had taken part in the attack were well known, it was only the senior male members of their own families who had the right to put pressure on them. Discussion of individual cases, in other words, was a matter for the domestic, not the public sphere. So the speakers at this meeting contented themselves with offering highly optimistic estimates of the length of time

(lusa), which reflected their junior age-grade status.

⁷ I prefer to use the term 'debate' for these meetings. They consist of a succession of speakers, each of whom speaks for no more than a few minutes, with no formal rules governing the order of speakers and with no equivalent of a chairman.

those who gave themselves up were likely to spend in prison – months, it was repeatedly suggested, rather than years – and with painting a rosy picture of prison life in Jinka. They would not face the death penalty (which has not been used by the present government, though it remains on the statute book); they would be fed; they would be given medical treatment as necessary; and they would have the chance to emulate Bedameri by learning to read and write Amharic.

For Bedameri himself, the main purpose of the debate was to ensure that, when they reached Hana, his companions spoke, as he repeatedly put it, ‘with one voice’, that they said what the government representatives wanted to hear and that those who made speeches did not use the highly discursive style of Mursi oratory, which government officials quickly become impatient with. In the last of his three contributions to the debate, he gave what amounted to a ‘pep talk’, instructing his ‘team’ on how they should conduct themselves at the meeting in Hana.

They [the government] told me not to say much. They said ‘this time we are going to speak to the people ourselves, directly. And we’ll find a Chachi⁸ to be the interpreter.’ They said that, when I’m the interpreter, I hide things the Mursi say that I don’t want the government to hear. ‘So you sit down and keep quiet’ they said ‘and let us do the talking. We want to hear directly from the elders. If they get off the point, we’ll stop them. We’ll tell them what they should say. And when they get it right, we’ll say, “That’s good. Why didn’t you say that before?”’

When Komorakora made a speech the other day in Jinka, he spoke in the Mursi way. He began with historical things and then, just as he was getting to what he wanted to say, they told him to sit down. ‘You are not saying anything’, they said. Komorakora said ‘My body is full of words. What am I to do?’

At the meeting in Hana the government representatives reiterated, as expected, their demand that the men who had taken part in the attack should give themselves up. For their part, the Mursi representatives undertook to persuade them to do so. After returning from Hana, Bedameri called another debate, the purpose of which was to get public commitments to this decision from as many senior men as possible.

In a short opening speech, Bedameri pointed out that, with so many men having gone to Hana for the meeting, no-one could now claim that he didn’t know how serious and urgent the situation was. The debate lasted three hours and there were another 22 speeches. I shall quote from Komorakora’s contribution, which began with a tirade against the Aari.

They have been murdering us for ages, those miserable wretches who drink

⁸ The Chai (sg. Chachi), who live west of the Omo and south of the Maji highlands, speak the same language as the Mursi.

their beer from gourds, like herd boys drink their milk. The ground up there [around Berka] is littered with Mursi bones. For a long time we did nothing. But when they killed Dorba⁹ we decided to retaliate. We thought this would teach them a lesson. But then they killed Tuku's wife [Kereramai] – a mere child – on our very doorstep. And when we retaliated, they played their usual trick – they ran to their husband [the government]¹⁰.

Disingenuously, he asked

Why didn't they return the attack and take our cattle? If they had done that, we could have made peace long ago. But instead of this, those miserable wretches have given us all this talk. We've had to kneel to the government, even us old people. We've had to spend hours in meetings in Jinka, and then in Hana, sitting on hard benches until our backsides ached. I've hardly seen my cattle or my children. Is that good?

He went on to sum up the wider political realities which gave him (and the Mursi) no choice but to submit to these humiliations.

Our country has shrunk and there is nowhere else for us to go. On one side of us, the land is full of Kuchumba [highlanders]. And on the other side of us, the land is full of Kuchumba. We just have this little bit of land in between. If the government attacked us, where could we go? They would wipe us out and our enemies would laugh. And if we were not finished off by the government, we would be finished off by hunger.

This was the clearest and most pithy statement I had heard from any Mursi on the subject of state encroachment and its impact on their identity. It is also highly significant that it was expressed in spatial terms.

The next day, Bedameri told me that five men had agreed to give themselves up, but he expected more to come forward over the next few days. By the end of January, nine were in prison in Jinka and, as far as the Mursi were concerned, there was nothing now standing in the way of formal peace-making with the Aari. But it turned out to be more complicated than this.

When the 'boys' actually got to prison, they began changing

⁹ This is the Mursi man who was shot dead by an Aari close to the village of Berka in 1991. In the retaliatory attack launched by the Mursi following this killing, between 50 and 60 Aari were killed.

¹⁰ Alexander Naty reports that this metaphor is used by the Aari themselves to describe their relationship to the state under both Haile Selassie's imperial regime and the socialist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam (2002, p. 72).

their stories – or, at least, they began elaborating on them in a way that made their conviction less than straightforward. Some said they had not taken part in the attack at all but, in giving themselves up, they were standing in for older relatives who had. Others said they had merely tagged on to the attack in order to drive back any stolen cattle, and that they had not been armed. One said that he had fired four shots but killed no-one. They had given themselves up, they said, only because they had been told – by Bedameri and his colleagues in the administration – that if they did not, the government would attack Mursi settlements and take their cattle. The response of the authorities to these claims was to demand that a deputation of senior Mursi go to Jinka, formally to confirm the guilt or innocence of the prisoners. Otherwise, all of them would be released and the whole process would be taken back to square one.

This news caused consternation amongst the Mursi elders. On the one hand, they considered that they had delivered their side of the agreement and that the government had now reneged on its side. On the other hand, they could not give evidence against men who were proclaiming their innocence since they would then be held to account by the families of these men, should any harm befall them in prison. Nevertheless, a large meeting of Aari and Mursi was organised by the government in April 2001, in order to begin peace negotiations. I was not present at this meeting (which was held on the Mago River, where the Mursi migrants had established themselves ten years earlier) but I was told that it ended in deadlock because the Aari made further demands – including that other Mursi who had been involved in the attack should hand themselves over to the police – which the Mursi were unable or unwilling to accept. The nine men remained in prison, without charge, until December 2001, when seven of them were released. In January 2002, when I was last in Jinka, the remaining two were still in prison but they had not been convicted or sentenced. No peace had been made with the Aari and the Mursi were still not able to make use of the markets in Berka and Balamer. It seemed that Bedameri's laboriously constructed house of cards had collapsed.

It is now time to consider some of the implications that arise from this case for the interplay of national and local political processes and for the role of the 'involved outsider' in the study of violent conflict.

The national-local interface

For Bedameri, the case highlighted the schizophrenic nature of his position, on the interface not just between local and national political processes, but also between the worlds of tradition and modernity. By tradition, in this context, I refer to the assumption that the norms and values which give purpose and meaning to life emanate from the place

of one's birth and up-bringing. By modernity I refer to the assumption that they emanate from somewhere else - in this case, from the encroaching bureaucratic and administrative structures of the Ethiopian state. Caught between these two worlds, Bedameri had the difficult, if not impossible task of representing and interpreting one world to the other.

He told me once of the difficulties of being 'in the middle', between the Mursi and the government, and of the impossibility of satisfying both sides. As for the Mursi,

They say I'm the government and expect me to bring relief grain. When I pass this request on I'm told that there is no transport and that there will be a delay of such and such a length of time. When I tell this to the Mursi they don't understand the reasons and blame me. Some say I'm only interested in my salary.

The difficulty he had in satisfying the demands of the government are evident from the case I have described. The reason he had these difficulties was that, in terms of the values and norms that gave meaning and purpose to his life, he was more firmly rooted in the world of tradition, the world of the Mursi, than he was in the world of modernity, the world of the government. His personal ambitions were Mursi-centric. They were focussed on the ideal of a successful and respected herd owner and head of a large family. He valued his salary certainly, but mainly, I believe, as a means of helping him to achieve these ambitions, especially by building up his stock wealth for future bridewealth payments. At the time of his death he had five surviving children and was on the point of marrying a third wife, for whom he had already handed over some of the bridewealth. (No fewer than nine of his children, including eight by his senior wife, had died.) So, when his colleagues in the administration accused him of being less than transparent in his role of linguistic interpreter and cultural translator, they were probably justified. But this was because he could not afford to damage the networks of trust, reciprocity and support within his local community that provided him with the primary source of his social capital.

For Komorakora, the case I have described was another indication, as he himself appeared to recognise, of how far the norms and values central to the collective identity of the Mursi, and his own position as the chief physical repository of those norms and values, had been undermined by ever closer engagement with the Ethiopian state. It is appropriate, therefore, that it should have fallen to him to encapsulate, in the phrase 'our land has shrunk', what I believe has been the most fundamental change to have affected the Mursi over the past thirty years. This is a change in their collective imagination, by

which I mean a change in their view of the world outside and their place within it, of their past and of their future.

The essence of the change is that they now see themselves, or are coming to see themselves, as a *local* group, existing on the periphery of a larger political structure. Thirty years ago, when I first met them, they still saw themselves as occupying a central position in relations to the outside world. In their own eyes they were a sovereign people whose survival had depended on their right and ability to occupy and exploit new territory, a view that is best summed up in their own aphorism, 'we are always looking for a cool place'. The realisation has now begun to dawn that they are a small, economically vulnerable and politically powerless people, firmly fixed to a specific territory, hemmed in by well-armed neighbours and confronted by an ever more intrusive state apparatus. The people who once saw themselves as 'always looking for a cool place' have finally run into the buffers of the Ethiopian state.

Another way of putting this is that the centre, the value and norm-producing centre, which they once saw themselves as inhabiting, has slipped away from them. It is now located elsewhere, although they don't know exactly where. The Mursi are beginning to discover what Zigmunt Bauman (1998) has called 'The discomforts of localised existence'.

Being local in a globalised world is a sign of deprivation and degradation. The discomforts of localised existence are compounded by the fact that with public spaces removed beyond the reaches of localised 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...(pp. 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.....; the verdicts are unquestionable since no questions may be meaningfully addressed to the judges and since the judges left no address...and no one can be sure where they reside. (pp. 25-26)

It is part of the received wisdom of post-modern anthropology that we should not think of local interests, and the experiences of local people, as homogeneous and that we should therefore focus our descriptions and analyses on differently situated individuals, who are subject to different constraints and who are presented with different opportunities and costs by the same events. This is what I have attempted to do in this lecture. It does not follow, however, that there is no such thing as a shared local view, or what Malkki (1995) calls a 'collective narrative' (p. 560) in which 'standard versions of events'

are ‘routinely produced’ (p. 58). What I find interesting here is how such a ‘collective narrative’ is constructed out of the different raw materials and the different versions that are available; how it is continually revised and adapted in the light of changing circumstances; and, at certain historical conjunctions such as the one I believe the Mursi are currently going through, how it is radically altered. This is a process that requires selective forgetting more than accurate remembering. In my view this is achieved amongst the Mursi principally through such debates as I have quoted from in this lecture. The speakers at these debates, especially the more respected and influential ones like Bedameri and Komorakora, fulfil a function in their community which is analogous to that of the news media in ours – to pursue the analogy further, they ‘edit the rushes of community life’ (Turton, 1992, p. 170). This is why I feel justified in privileging their voices, despite the often repeated dictum that ‘no one voice is more important than another’ (Nordstrom, 1997, p. 8; see also Englund, 2000, p. 67). It may be that *some* voices *are* more important than others, because of the disproportionate influence they have in constructing a ‘collective narrative’ for the community as a whole.

The case I have described has shown, I think, that the re-configuring of political space that has taken place in Ethiopia since the EPRDF came to power in 1991 has resulted in more rather than less state intrusion into the affairs of the Mursi. The same conclusion is reached by Jon Abbink (2002, p. 165) for the Surma or Suri,¹¹ western neighbours of the Mursi who speak the same language, share the same agro-pastoral economy and have a similar relationship with their highland neighbours to the north of them, the Dizi. Abbink also notes that it is difficult to establish a causal link between ‘renewed state interference and violence’ (op. cit. p. 166). On the one hand there are pre-existing structural factors that help to explain violent conflict between the Surma and the Dizi but, on the other, the institutionalisation of ethnic politics under the EPRDF has meant that all problems now tend to be seen as ethnic problems. Essentially the same analysis can be applied to the Mursi-Aari case.

Two reasons immediately come to mind for thinking that increased levels of violence between Mursi and Aari would have occurred anyway, irrespective of any change in the wider political space of Ethiopia. First, the underlying causes of Mursi-Aari violence are firmly rooted in a long term process of ecological change (specifically the drying out of the Omo basin) which has been going on

¹¹ These terms are used interchangeably to refer, collectively, to two groups, the Chai and the Tirma, who live west of the Omo and south of the Maji highlands. The Mursi have particularly close links with the Chai, there being a high level of intermarriage between them. In recent years, the Tirma and Chai have been pushing northwards into the foothills of the Maji highlands, under pressure from their southern neighbours, the Nyangatom, much as the Mursi have been pushing eastward into the Mago Valley.

for at least the last three thousand years (Butzer, 1971, p. 15) and which has led to continuous pressure on better watered and forested highland areas by mixed cattle herders and cultivators like the Mursi and the Surma (Turton, 1988). The latest outbreak of Mursi-Aari violence must therefore be seen as part of this historical process and not as a recent development. It follows that, if there has been an increase in the incidence and scale of violence between Mursi and Aari over the last ten years, the simplest explanation for this is the recent Mursi migration into the Mago Valley. This was, after all, their latest pioneering move into the highlands surrounding the Omo Valley, and one that the Aari were bound to be alarmed by.

Second, the influx of automatic weapons into the lower Omo area that took place in the 1980s and 1990s could well have been responsible for increased levels of inter-group violence. This is not so much because the greater firepower of these weapons may have caused more people to be killed in the course of violent incidents,¹² but because their ready availability may have upset the balance of political power between senior and junior men, thereby weakening internal mechanisms of social control, as Abbink reports for the Surma (2000). It was frequently asserted, during the debates I referred to earlier, that the men who attacked the Aari in January 1999 did so in a mindless rush, ‘ducking under the arm pits’ of older men who were trying to hold them back. This was in contrast to the retaliatory attack that was launched following the 1991 killing of a Mursi near Berka which was, by all accounts, a much more deliberate and considered action, having been fully discussed beforehand in a public debate.

What remains to be accounted for is the (as far as I know) continuing failure to resolve the latest conflict between the Mursi and Aari. It is this which I think we can reasonably attribute to increased state intrusion and to the new Ethiopian politics of ethnic federalism. What we have to explain here is why the government chose (or felt obliged) to depart from the traditional method of Mursi-Aari conflict resolution and why, even when considerable progress had been made towards satisfying the unprecedented conditions it had laid down, peace remained as elusive as ever. It is difficult not to conclude, although I have no direct evidence to support this conclusion, that the explanation lies in a transformation in the local political power balance, as a result of the EPRDF’s policy of regional autonomy.

Alexander Naty has written about the Aari experience of domination and powerlessness under the imperial regime of Haile Selassie and in the later years of the socialist regime of Mengistu Haile

¹² More people were killed in the 1991 attack on the Aari (see above, Footnote 7), when the Mursi did not have automatic weapons, than were killed in the 1999 attack, when they did..

Mariam, and how this experience was expressed in metaphors of gender and masculinity.

Informants often remarked that their situation under.... [the imperial and socialist] states was similar to a marital relationship in which the husband assumed a dominant status in relation to his subordinate and subservient wife. Some informants used the metaphor of a serf-master relationship in characterising Aari relations with the socialist state. (2002, p. 72)

It seems likely that the remapping of Ethiopia under the EPRDF may have, at least for the moment, transformed this situation. That is, it may have done for the Aari what it has been reported to have done for other southwestern groups, such as the Konso (Watson, 2002) – namely, given them, for the first time, ‘some stake in a political structure in which they had hitherto been a mere subject people’ and a ‘sense of local political ownership which had not previously existed’ (Clapham, 2002, p. 28). If this is so (and one reason why it seems likely is that several Aari were now in positions of responsibility in the local administration) it would follow that, in turning to the government following the Mursi attack, the Aari were not so much seeking the protection of their ‘husband’ (as Komorakora contemptuously put it in the speech I quoted from earlier) as demanding action by the authorities from a position of political strength. Because of their new-found influence within the local administration, backed up by the threat of ‘exemplary terror’ from the Federal Government’s military forces, they were, for the first time, in a position to dictate terms to the Mursi. Above all, they were no longer forced to accept a process of conflict resolution which was predicated on the military superiority of the Mursi, whose long term expansionary and predatory ambitions it did nothing, therefore, to contain.

The Anthropologist

I have not yet given much away about my own involvement in this case. In fact I have been about as reticent on this score as most anthropologists usually are, telling you only that I have been visiting the Mursi for over thirty years and that I was with them on this occasion to help make a documentary film. I now want to give more details about my practical and emotional involvement in the case, and with the Mursi. This will give a better idea of the extent to which I was part of the situation I have been describing.

The main theme of the film¹³ turned out to be the Mursi-Aari conflict and the efforts of Bedameri to get the ‘boys’ to give themselves up. But this was not planned. As with the five earlier films

¹³ The film, *Fire Will Eat Us*, was shown on Channel 4 Television in the UK in August 2001.

I have helped to make amongst the Mursi, the theme was dictated by what happened to be the main ‘story’ affecting the community at the time. Nor did I have any idea, in advance, what the story was likely to be this time, since I had last visited the Mursi four years earlier. I spent most of January 2001 in northern Mursiland, with a filmmaker colleague who was armed with a small digital video camera. We set up camp about an hour’s walk from Bedameri’s homestead and about ten minutes walk from the main meeting place for local men where the debates I have described took place. Bedameri spent a good deal of time in our camp, using it as his ‘office’. It was from here that he and his party set out for the Hana meeting. There was a constant stream of people through the camp. Asking for news and/or reporting back to Bedameri on which ‘boys’ had agreed to give themselves up and which had not. Several of those who did agree also set out for Hana from our camp. I gave them each 15 Ethiopian Birr (just under \$2) to buy food after they had arrived in Hana, since they would not be fed by the police.

This was, of course, all very convenient for the anthropologist and the filmmaker, since we could cover the ‘story’ without straying more than a few minutes from the comfort of our camp. I presume it was also helpful for Bedameri, as he worked to mobilise the support and cooperation of his fellow Mursi, to be able to operate from a base provided by these powerful and technologically sophisticated foreigners, one of whom had known the Mursi for thirty years and enjoyed their trust. I was, in effect, giving my public support and approval to what Bedameri – and the government – were trying to do.

We were joined at the end of January, after the nine men had gone to prison, by the Director of the film, Leslie Woodhead, and two more members of the film crew. During February we camped at Komorakora’s settlement in the Mago Valley. On a visit from there to Jinka with Bedameri, we filmed a meeting, on which I sat in, with the government official who was most closely involved in the case. It was on this occasion that we learned that the prisoners were creating a ‘problem’ by claiming that they had given themselves up, not because they had killed anyone but to prevent government retribution against the Mursi. Afterwards, we went to the prison to take money to the Mursi prisoners.

Before we left for home, at the end of February, we used our vehicle to bring a respected Aari leader from Balamer, the village that had been attacked by the Mursi in 1999, to Jinka to meet Bedameri and Komorakora. We did this at Bedameri’s request, and with the support of the administration and the local Aari MP. This was the first such meeting to have taken place between Mursi and Aari for two years and I hope it was beneficial to the peace process. I *know* it was beneficial

to the film, since it provided the 'closure' that is all important for a good ending.

I made no effort to criticise the Mursi attack on the Aari, other than as an act of imprudence. It was imprudent because it was based on a strategy of predatory expansion which, as Komorakora so clearly stated, has become counter-productive, given the wider political realities the Mursi now face. The men who gave themselves up had sacrificed their freedom to prevent harm befalling their community, after having taken the kind of action against the Aari which they had been brought up to think of as their public duty. When I returned to Jinka in November 2001 and found that they were still in prison without having been charged, I made some enquiries with the administration and the President of the Jinka High Court about the status of their cases. On a later visit to the prison I found that seven of them had been released. I do not know whether my enquiries helped to bring about this result, but I do know that I did not protest too much when I found that the Mursi were attributing the release of the men to my intervention. And yet, they had been involved in a deliberate and indiscriminate act of terror, carried out against men, women and children and little different, therefore, to the tactics of 'exemplary terror' employed by the EPRDF's own Rapid Response Force, which I described earlier.

It is relevant here to mention my response to the Nyangatom attack on the Mursi of February 1987. The Mursi had at that time no access to automatic weapons and, when I reached them, I found that they were living in fear of another attack by the Nyangatom. They expected this to come in a month or two, when the Omo would be at its lowest annual level and it would be easy for raiders to take stolen cattle back across to the west bank. They also expected that a second attack would drive them from their land entirely. Their clan names would survive, since small pockets of survivors would find refuge with surrounding groups, but the Mursi would no longer exist. The only way they could hold on to their territory, they said, was to obtain a supply of automatic weapons as quickly as possible. I believe that, had I been able to provide them with these weapons, there and then, I would have done so. As it was, I embarked upon a frenzied few days of travel between the Omo, Arba Minch (the capital of the then province of Gamu Gofa) and Addis Ababa, doing my level best to persuade the authorities to arm a 'Mursi Militia' with automatic rifles. Not surprisingly, and probably wisely, they did not, although I believe they did provide them with a number of conventional rifles. As it happened, the Nyangatom did not launch the expected second attack and, by 1992, the Mursi were beginning to get their own automatics from the Sudan, a development I was not able to regret.

I leave you with a question. Can one present an account of violent conflict, as an involved outsider, without allowing and encouraging the reader (or the television viewer) to identify more strongly with side A than side B, and thereby helping either to demonise side B (in the Mursi-Nyangatom case) or to justify horrific acts of violence by side A (in the Mursi-Aari case)? If not, then by writing about violence as an anthropologist in cases like these, one is more likely to help reproduce it than to prevent it. I have taken the view in this lecture that one way we might hope to avoid such an outcome is to ask what the conflict meant to certain differently situated but key individuals and to make clear the practical involvement and emotional commitment of the anthropologist. Whether the account I have given bears out this hope is for you to decide. I am only sorry that Bernhard is not here to add his own answer to this question, an answer which, we all know, would have been direct, outspoken and, above all, deeply felt.

References

- Abbink, J (2000) Violence and the crisis of conciliation: Suri, Dizi and the state in south-west Ethiopia. *Africa*, 70 (4): 527-50.
- Abbink J. (2002) Paradoxes of power and culture in an old periphery: Surma, 1974-98, in W. James et al.(eds.) *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After*, James Currey, Oxford.
- Bauman, Z. (1998) *Globalization: the Human Consequences*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Butzer, K. W. (1971) *Recent History of an Ethiopian Delta: The Omo River and the Level of Lake Rudolf*, University of Chicago, Department of Geography, Research Paper No. 136.
- Clapham, Christopher (2002) Controlling Space in Ethiopia, in W.James et al. (eds.) *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After*. James Currey, Oxford.
- Donham, D. (1999) *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution*. University of California Press/James Currey, Berkeley/Oxford
- Donham, D. (2002) Introduction, in W. James et al. (eds.) *Remapping*

Ethiopia:

Socialism and After, James Currey, Oxford.

Donham, D. and James, W. (1986) *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia:*

Essays in History and Social Anthropology, Cambridge University Press,
Cambridge.

Englund, H. (2000) (Wo)man in war. *Antropologiska Studier*, Nr. 66-67, pp. 61-73

Helander, B. (2001) Some Problems in African Conflict resolution: Reflections on

Alternative Reconciliation Work and Research. *Somali Watch*, 10 August 2001,
<http://www.somaliwatch.org/archiveoct00/001005603.htm> (Originally published in Danish, as Overvejelse omkring alternative forligsmødder i Afrika, in *Den Ny Verden*, 28 (2):41-54, 1995)

Hermann, T. (2001) The Impermeable Identity Wall: The Study of Violent Conflicts

by 'Insiders' and 'Outsiders'. In M. Smyth and G. Robinson (eds.)

Researching Violently Divided Societies, Pluto Press/United Nations

University Press, Tokyo/London.

James, W., Donham, D., Kurimoto, E. and Triulzi, A. (eds) (2002) *Remapping*

Ethiopia: Socialism and After. James Currey, Oxford.

Lewis, I. (2002) Obituary: Bernhard Helander, *Journal of the Anglo-Somali Society*.

Malkki, L. (1995) *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology*

among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and

London.

Naty, A. (2002) Memory and the Humiliation of Men: The revolution in Aari, in W.

James et al. (eds.) *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and after*, James Currey, Oxford.

Nordstrom, C. (1997) *A Different Kind of War Story*, University of Pennsylvania Press,

Philadelphia.

Turton, D. (1988) Looking for a cool place: the Mursi, 1890s to 1980s,

in D. Johnson

and D. Anderson (eds.) *The Ecology of Survival: Case Studies from Northeast*

African History. Lester Crook Academic Publishing/Westview Press,

London/Boulder

Turton, D. (1992) How to make a speech in Mursi, in P. I. Crawford and J.K.

Simonsen (eds.) *Ethnographic Film: Aesthetics and Narrative Traditions*

Intervention Press, in Association with the Nordic Anthropological Film

Association, Aarhus, Denmark.

Watson, E. (2002) Capturing a Local Elite: The Konso Honeymoon, in W. James et

al. (eds.) *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After*, James Currey, Oxford

Woodhead, L. (Dir.) (2001) *Fire Will Eat Us*. Granada T.V. for Channel 4 Television,

London (90 mins.)

(9,082)