



Map 2 Ethnic groups in the lower Omo valley, Ethiopia

1 Mursi Political Identity & Warfare: The Survival of an Idea

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Since 1970, the Mursi, who live in the lower Omo valley of south-western Ethiopia, have suffered a series of calamities comparable, in terms of human suffering and general social disruption, to those which affected large areas of north-east Africa at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Then it was rinderpest, smallpox, drought, famine and the expansion of the Ethiopian state which threatened their survival. Over the past 20 years it has been drought and famine, growing demographic pressure on subsistence resources, and the spread of automatic weapons into the Omo valley from Uganda and Sudan (Turton, 1977, 1988, 1989).

These last developments represent the most recent and, in Mursi eyes, most severe threat to their continued existence as an autonomous political entity. One incident in particular brought them face to face with the imminent prospect of a world without Mursi. In February 1987, their south-western neighbours, the Nyangatom (also called Bume in Ethiopia and Dogiro in Kenya), who had recently obtained Kalashnikov automatic rifles from Sudan, launched a massive attack on the southern Mursi, killing several hundred people (possibly 500), mainly women and children, in one day. Immediately afterwards, the Mursi evacuated the entire southern part of their territory. When I visited them in December 1987, they were confidently expecting a second Nyangatom attack within the next three months. Unless they could arm themselves with automatics, they said, they would be driven from their land entirely and have to find refuge where they could in the highlands, on either side of the Omo valley. Although they would survive there as individuals in scattered enclaves, and

although their clan names would persist, the 'Mursi' would have disappeared.

I took this to mean that those who survived this dispersal would no longer identify themselves as Mursi, although they would, apparently, continue to identify themselves as members of named clans. Mursi identity, it seemed, was problematic in relation to clan identity. It was not given in nature but had to be humanly created and deliberately maintained. My aim here is to clarify the notion of Mursi identity, and to explore the role of warfare in creating and maintaining it. I begin by explaining why I prefer to call it political rather than ethnic.

Political versus ethnic identity

Political identity and ethnic identity are terms often used interchangeably because both refer to the identity an individual can find through membership of a collectivity. (I use the term collectivity to include both groups and categories.) When they are used to designate the collectivities themselves, however, ethnic and political carry different implications. The key difference is that the first implies a mode of recruitment while the second implies a mode of organization.

In his account of the 'ethnic origins' of European nations, Anthony Smith identifies six 'key elements of that complex of meanings which underlie the sense of ethnic ties and sentiments for the participants' (1986: 24). One of these, which he calls 'the *sine qua non* of ethnicity', is 'myths of origins and descent'. Another is 'association with a specific territory', a form of words chosen to take account of cases where the 'ethnic' (group) has been dispersed from its homeland.

Ethnic do not cease to be *ethnic* when they are dispersed and have lost their homeland; for ethnicity is a matter of myths, memories, values and symbols and not of material possessions or political power, both of which require a habitat for their realization . . . [P]oetic and symbolic qualities possess greater potency than everyday attributes; a land of dreams is far more significant than any actual terrain. (p. 28)

The usefulness of the ethnic label, both in political rhetoric and popular discourse, is based on the assumption it embodies that mere consciousness of shared origins is enough to constitute a group. This in turn enables it to be applied to groups which are, in reality, very different from each other, both organizationally and in terms of the behaviour of their members; or which may not be groups at all in any meaningful sense of the

word, but rather categories (Cohen, 1969: 4).

The disadvantages from the point of view of sociological analysis are comparable to those which Scheffler identified long ago in his critique of descent theory. (1966). The mere presence of a descent construct (recognition of a tie to a common ancestor) in the minds of members of a group does not, Scheffler points out, tell us much about the nature of that group. We have to go on to specify how the construct is related to group activities. One of the ways in which it may be so related is as a principle of recruitment, but we should begin, logically and empirically, with the group as an operational entity. A 'descent group', in other words, is not a group because of 'descent' — a mental construct — but because its members do certain things together.

My favourite illustration of the kind of difficulties into which descent theorists were led by their failure to appreciate this simple point is the following passage from Goody's account of the LoWiili of north-western Ghana, in which he wrestles with the 'limiting case' of the 'matrilineage' (1967):

This group is known by a technical term but has no specific name. It conforms to none of the usual criteria of a corporate group. It is non-localized. It is not a property-holding group. Its members never meet together, nor do representatives of segments, and it is therefore not an assembling group . . . Though limited in its functions and vague in its conceptualization, it nevertheless constitutes a social group in the accepted sociological sense . . . The existence of a technical term itself indicates a consciousness of unity. (p. 85)

In other words, it is a group simply because there exists a technical term for a genealogical connection through women.

The same kind of clarification which Scheffler introduced into the discussion of descent and descent groups seems to me to be called for in the discussion of ethnicity and ethnic groups. The point is not to deny the reality and importance of the 'ethnic construct', but to question the usefulness of treating it as the logical prerequisite and sufficient condition for the existence of a group. An ethnic group, in other words, is not a group because of ethnicity but because its members engage in common action and share common interests. Having identified the group on the basis of these 'operational' criteria, it is then a matter for empirical investigation to determine how the 'ethnic construct' is related to it — as principle of recruitment, for example, or simply as symbolic expression of unity and solidarity.

I have made the focus of this paper the political, rather than ethnic identity of the Mursi, because I am concerned with the organization of collective action, within a territorial framework, and because I wish to stress that it is this, rather than a tradition

of common origin, which makes them a group in the first place. It would be pointless to ask whether the Mursi do or do not constitute an ethnic group, but it is instructive to consider how the two criteria of ethnicity quoted above from Smith — ‘myth of origins and descent’ and ‘association with a specific territory’ — might apply to them. For this it is useful to return to their own prediction that, were they to be dispersed from their present territory, the Mursi would disappear but their clan identities would persist.

There are around a dozen clans (*kabicho*, sing. *kabi*) which are named exogamous categories of the population, based on putative descent from a common ancestor. The Mursi ‘myth of origins’ is an account of how five of these clans (Komorte, Bumai, Juhai, Kagisi and Garakuli) originated at a place called Thaleb, somewhere to the south-east, and how they migrated in an anticlockwise direction into their present territory, ‘finding’ and forming affinal alliances with other clans *en route*. These ‘original’ clans therefore are seen as the historical core of the population, but they are not exclusive to the Mursi; the same clan names are found amongst the Chai and Tirma (collectively known as Surma) to the west of the Omo (Abbink, 1991: 8–9).

The decisive event in creating a specifically Mursi identity was the movement of members of these clans from the west to the east bank of the Omo, sometime during the first half of the nineteenth century. That this event was decisive is attested by oral history and borne out by linguistic evidence. The Mursi and Surma speak mutually intelligible languages, but that of the Mursi differs phonetically from the others in ways consistent with it having been the last to diverge from the common stock. That the migration occurred less than 200 years ago is clear from genealogical information — specifically, answers to the question, ‘Which of your ancestors was the first to be born on the east bank of the Omo?’

Mursi informants openly admit, with no hint of moral discomfort, that they took their present territory from its previous inhabitants, the Bodi, who retreated north of the River Mara (see Map 2). But the area evacuated by the Bodi was much larger than that which the invaders initially occupied around Kurum, in the south-western corner of present Mursi territory. It was not until the 1930s that Mursi began to cultivate along the River Mara, making it their *de facto* northern boundary, and it was not until 1975, after two more wars with the Bodi, that the Mara became the *de jure* boundary between the two groups (Turton, 1988). This progressive spreading out from Kurum, which is now regarded as the historical centre or ‘stomach’ of Mursiland, seems to date

from the 1890s, a decade which saw the arrival in the lower Omo valley of not only of the first European explorers, but also the occupying forces of Emperor Menelik’s expanding state of Abyssinia, and a disastrous rinderpest epidemic, which had already devastated large areas of the Ethiopian highlands and Sudan (Pankhurst & Johnson, 1988).

An account of Mursi origins, therefore, can take two forms. On the one hand, it can focus on the journey of five ‘original’ clans from a place of origin called Thaleb, which cannot be identified by either the Mursi or anyone else with any actual place, but which is, in Smith’s phrase, a ‘land of dreams’. On the other hand, it can focus on the relatively recent and continued occupation of an ‘actual terrain’, Kurum, and the subsequent and relatively easily documented ‘colonization’ of the area between Kurum and the River Mara.

Indulging for a moment in speculation, one can imagine Kurum, the present historical and symbolic ‘centre’ of Mursiland, as a future ‘land of dreams’. Imagine a dispersal of the present Mursi population; clan identities survive and new territorially based units, equivalent to the now dissolved Mursi, are created around core populations drawn from those clans. Perhaps Kurum will then become for those units what Thaleb is for the present Mursi. But it will not remain the territorial base of a specifically Mursi identity. Perhaps this imagined scenario can be seen as a repeat performance of the historical events which lay behind the ‘myth of origins’ just outlined. For this we need only to see the predicted disaster of flight before an enemy armed with automatic weapons as equivalent to some earlier disaster which may have dispersed a population (not a Mursi population) from a place now remembered as Thaleb.

The point I wish to emphasize is that Mursi identity is linked essentially to the occupation of an ‘actual terrain’ and not to the supposed origin of certain Mursi clans in a ‘land of dreams’. The following are evidence of this: (i) it is not only Mursi clans who claim this origin; (ii) members of clans who do not claim this origin are nevertheless fully Mursi; (iii) dispersal from their present territory is, in the eyes of the people themselves, tantamount to the disappearance of the Mursi; and (iv) the belief that their clan identities would survive such dispersal. This is why I prefer to think of Mursi identity as political rather than ethnic and of ‘the Mursi’ simply as a territorially based political unit. The label ‘ethnic’ would seem to be more appropriately applied to clan identities, which are not territorially based and which do not involve collective action, save in ritual contexts.

In his work on interethnic clan identities in northern Kenya, Gunther Schlee (1985; 1989) has drawn attention to the fact that clan identities cut across ethnic — I would prefer to call them 'political' — divisions and are often much older than those divisions.

Clans, and more so subclans, are thought of as natural in the sense that their members have specific innate physical, ritual and mental qualities . . . they are also believed by some people to be universal . . . quite a number of clan identities which are socially relevant today must be older than 400 years, and older than some present day ethnic [political] divisions. It is these clan identities which have remained stable . . . and that provide us with a valuable key to the history of this area. (1985)

Whatever the implications of this for the historian, Schlee ends his article with some observations which are highly pertinent to the anthropologist interested in the 'social construction' of group boundaries.

Normally we define a geographical or social unit at the beginning of our study: we study such-and-such an institution among the So-and-so, and we define the So-and-so even before we go out into the field. Ethnic categories may thus become straitjackets for our thought . . . More important, ethnic categories are used as a privileged grid of classification which blinds us to the other categories by which people identify themselves or others. Might it not be better to start with a radical application of the concept 'network' than from established social units? (p. 33)

Substituting my terminology for Schlee's, what we are faced with here is the suggestion not only that clan identities are, as a matter of empirical fact, older than many of the political divisions they cut across, but that they are seen as 'given' or 'natural' by the people themselves. In other words, relationships based on clan identities are seen as the 'stuff' of social life, out of which relatively impermanent and fragile political divisions are constructed.

If groups such as the Mursi are treated, to all intents and purposes, as 'given in nature', then the conflict which is seen to define their boundaries is also given in nature: it is simply the way in which independent political groups must relate to each other in the absence of an overarching political structure. But, if a network of relations based on clanship and other identities is treated as primary, conflict begins to look like one of the means by which independent and mutually opposed political units are temporarily 'carved out' from this 'underlying' sociality in the first place. In the next section I apply this line of reasoning to the Mursi case. In doing so I am indebted not only to Schlee's work on clan identities in northern Kenya, but also to Simon

Harrison's (1989) interpretation of warfare at Avatip, on the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea.

Political identity and warfare

What seems to have happened in the anthropological study of war is that armed conflict between tribal groups has been artificially isolated from encompassing state structures and yet analysed on the basis of an explanatory model, the purpose of which is to legitimize the state form of political organization. The main assumption of this model, formulated most famously by Thomas Hobbes, is that a propensity for conflict, and violent conflict in particular, is a fact of human nature which it is the purpose of the state to keep in check. The fundamental problem of political organization at the state level is the suppression of violence — or, better, defining it as illegitimate.

This Hobbesian view of aggression and warfare was modified but not reversed by the Durkheimian tradition in social anthropology. For Durkheim, the group is also the source of peace and order through the moral authority it exerts over the individual. This, of course, was an explanation of social order specifically designed for societies defined as a residual class — namely, those lacking the centralized authority structures characteristic of states. The central problem of structural-functional anthropology became that of social control. Although cultural variation in the incidence and form of warfare required explanation, the institution of war itself did not. It was simply the inevitable consequence of a lack of overarching mechanisms of social control — in other words, of the state. Thus has anthropology bolstered the Hobbesian project: the legitimization of the state form of political organization.

One can go further in identifying a Hobbesian bias in the way anthropologists have represented 'tribal' warfare. Perhaps the most widespread approach to be found in the literature is the materialist one. This has been described by Brian Ferguson (1984: 23) as focusing on 'war's relation to the practical problems of maintaining life and living standards'. More recently, Ferguson has identified three 'mutually reinforcing premises' of the materialist approach: that 'causal primacy' is given to the 'infrastructure'; that 'there may be competition between and selection among groups'; 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). These propositions seem to boil

down to the single assumption that warfare is the result, in one way or another, of competition between groups for scarce resources. This in turn is based on two other, unspoken, assumptions: that competition is a fact of nature which does not, therefore, need to be accounted for, and that groups exist independently of the relations between them. The materialist explanation of warfare, in other words, only works if the same assumptions are made about groups as Hobbes made about individuals.

These assumptions are so evidently linked to a specifically Western understanding of what it means to be human and of the relationship between the individual and society (Howell & Willis, 1989: 10-12) that they must be highly suspect as the 'premises' of any attempt to define, let alone explain, war as a universal human phenomenon. But there are also empirical grounds for doubting the usefulness of treating groups such as the Mursi and their neighbours as Hobbesian individuals writ large. For not only are they, both to themselves and to the outside observer, the products of relatively recent population movements, but they also form today a regional system of economically interdependent contiguous local groups (Turton, 1991).

The suggestion that groups are defined by the relations between them is hardly new in anthropology. Over 20 years ago, Frederick Barth pointed out that, in contrast to 'the simplistic view that geographical and social isolation have been the critical factors in sustaining cultural diversity', ethnic boundaries 'do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are based' (1969: 9-10). The idea that exchange serves to create groups rather than to link pre-existing ones has also proved applicable in both the New Guinea and the African contexts. Roy Wagner (1967) argued that the patrilineal clans of the Daribi were the product of the gift transactions of their members. Wendy James (1978) has explained the 'sudden' appearance of matriliney among the Uduk of the Sudan-Ethiopia borderland as the result of the 'suspension' of marriage transactions upon which the existence of patrilineal groups depends. And I have argued that 'it would be circular to interpret the payment of bridewealth [among the Mursi] 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).

Harrison, in his account of warfare at Avatip, on the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, has extended this line of reasoning to include both exchange and warfare. His argument is that warfare and peaceful exchange are simply two different, but not

opposed or mutually incompatible, ways of creating boundaries between groups, of creating groups 'in the first place'. It has often been argued that exchange is functionally equivalent to warfare in Melanesia, in the sense that it acts as a surrogate for the latter. What Harrison emphasizes, for Avatip, is that both exchange and warfare are forms of ritual, and therefore social, action which serve to define and create groups, and that 'peaceful' exchange is not seen as opposed to, controlling, or substituting for the 'asocial' activity of warfare:

warfare was not a kind of by-product or residuum of their political independence, as though they could take that independence for granted from the start, but the 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. (1989: 595)

The Mursi have, in their own eyes, faced the possibility of extermination in the last few years, specifically since the massacre of around one-tenth of the population by the Nyangatom in February 1987 (Turton, 1989). But there is another and more 'basic' sense in which they are threatened; through a loss of confidence in the centrality and power of their indigenous institutions. Such a loss of confidence could happen simply through increasing contact with the Ethiopian state, an alien political structure over which they have no control, and in relation to which they have no means of making themselves 'count' as an autonomous unit. This alien structure is the source of keenly felt needs and alternative values which the indigenous institutions cannot define, let alone satisfy.

What is at stake, then, when talking about the disappearance of the Mursi, is not simply their capacity to provide for their own physical survival within a defined territory, but also, and more fundamentally, the capacity of their institutions to go on defining the values and satisfying the needs which give meaning and purpose to social existence. This line of reasoning implies that social institutions are not ends in themselves but the means by which, together, people define their values and realize them in concerted, collective action. It also implies that political identity is a product rather than a cause of social action. Following Harrison (1989) I suggest that, for the Mursi and their neighbours, warfare is not a means by which an already constituted political group seeks to defend or extend its territory, but a means by which the very idea of it as an independent political unit, free from the normative claims of outsiders, is created and kept alive. This hypothesis accounts well enough for the part played by

warfare and its ritual resolution in defining the changing territorial relationship between the Mursi and their northern neighbours, the Bodi, over the past 100 years (see Fukui in this volume). It is clear that, as distinct political units, these peoples are as much products of their periodically hostile relations with each other, as they are of their relations with the physical environment (Turton, 1979, 1988). The same hypothesis accounts for the way in which the Mursi responded to the Nyangatom attack of February 1987.

The Nyangatom, one of the 'Karamojong cluster' of peoples who speak the same language as the Turkana, are concentrated in the Nakua area along the Kibish River, which here forms the boundary between Ethiopia and Sudan. Tornay (1981) calls this the 'pastoral region' and its inhabitants the 'pastoral Nyangatom', to distinguish them from those who live permanently at the Omo River and depend almost entirely on cultivation. During the 1970s, the Nyangatom were at war with most of their neighbours and lost nearly 10 per cent (400-500 people) of their population as a result, mainly at the hands of the Dassanetch (Tornay, 1979). Relations between the Nyangatom and the Mursi were also hostile during this period, but the conflict between them remained at the level of retaliatory killings; a few on either side died (Tornay, 1979: 105). At other times, there appears to be what might be called a watchful peace between Nyangatom and Mursi, with some economic exchange between individuals; for example, Mursi pots for Nyangatom grain, or Mursi grain for Nyangatom goats. These contacts are regular and close enough for Mursi living from Kurum southwards to understand, and occasionally speak, some Nyangatom.

Since 1984, the Nyangatom have become increasingly well armed with automatic rifles and are now conscious of being 'king of the tribes' in the lower Omo area (Tornay, 1992). One of the major events in the Nyangatom rise to dominance was the February 1987 attack on the Mursi. This was sparked by a particularly provocative Mursi killing, a few weeks earlier, of six Nyangatom who were staying as guests in a Mursi settlement at Gowa, on the Omo north of Kurum (Alvarsson, 1989: 54). After this incident the Nyangatom planned a large-scale attack, using automatic weapons.

According to one account I was given, the Mursi living south of Gowa were warned that a retaliatory raid was being planned, but were told that it would not be directed at them. They were advised — treacherously according to my informant — to evacuate their settlements and congregate further west, towards the

Omo-Mago junction until after the anticipated attack. On 21 February, a Nyangatom war party crossed the Omo at the Kara village of Dus, moved northwards up the east bank of the Omo, turned westwards to cross the Mago and attacked these Mursi — mainly women and children — who had sought safety by gathering together in the bush (Alvarsson, 1989: 56). Only the roughest estimate can be given of the number who died. The Mursi told me I could get some idea by imagining a crowded marketplace in the district capital, Jinka, but it must have been several hundred.

This event upset the normal 'tit for tat' of Mursi-Nyangatom warfare, not only because of the large number of Mursi casualties and because most of them were women and children, but also because it proclaimed a drastic technological imbalance between the two groups, which, four years later, at the time of my last visit (January 1991), showed no sign of being eliminated. The Nyangatom had gone from strength to strength, being able to obtain Kalashnikovs for as little as four to seven head of cattle. Their main source of supply appeared to be the Toposa, fellow members of the Karamojong cluster living 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, 1992). The Mursi had no access to automatic weapons, and had so far not been able to acquire them in significant numbers through their established links with arms dealers in the Ethiopian highlands, to the east of the Omo valley.

Immediately after the massacre, the Mursi abandoned the southern part of their territory. When I visited them, 10 months later (December 1987), they were expecting another onslaught from the Nyangatom which, they predicted, would force them to abandon the rest of their territory. There was no doubt that the Mursi wanted an end to a situation of great insecurity, which was having serious adverse consequences for economic production. Most serious of all was the fact that they had abandoned their flood-retreat cultivation sites along the banks of the Omo from Kurum southwards. (These were not reoccupied until the 1989-90 dry season.) But the only way the Mursi could see of ending this insecurity was through a counter-attack, comparable to the one the Nyangatom had launched against 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). Most important of all, the Mursi war party would have to be armed with at least some automatic weapons.

From what I was told, it was not the physical impact these weapons would have on the Nyangatom that mattered, but what possession of them by the Mursi would symbolize. The Mursi I spoke to in December 1987 seemed ready to mount a 'return match' — they used the analogy of 'home' and 'away' duelling contests between Mursi territorial sections — even if they had as few as 10 automatic rifles. When I objected that this would mean, in the long run, many more Mursi than Nyangatom deaths, I was told that this did not matter; the surviving Mursi would still be able to make a secure peace. It was not a simple matter, then, of the Mursi taking physical revenge on the Nyangatom, by inflicting an equivalent blow to the February massacre. What was at issue, it seemed, was a symbolic, not an actual, equivalence, whether of war casualties or weapons. This suggests that the activity of warfare itself, and not just the joint rituals with which it concluded, can be seen as a common ritual language, a system of shared meanings by which groups make themselves significant to each other and to themselves, as independent political entities.

Rather than speaking, as I did above, of the Mursi making peace with the Nyangatom, it would be more accurate to speak of them re-establishing the relationship they enjoyed before the 1987 massacre, which was certainly not one of peace. What the massacre had destroyed was not peace, but a relationship of mutual respect between two politically autonomous and independent groups. For the Mursi, the intensification of the conflict with the Nyangatom would represent the restoration of the previous political order, not its breakdown. As at Avatip:

Their imagined antithesis of political order is not an imagined state of total violence, a collapse of all social restraint in a war of all against all. Rather, escalation is a positive constitutive process, in which each stage calls for a greater intensity of action . . . and is always seen, therefore, as under the actors' control. (Harrison, 1989: 592).

What, in their own eyes, threatened the survival of the Mursi as a political group was not that so many people had been killed in the Nyangatom attack of February 1987, or that many more were likely to be killed in future attacks but that, having no access to automatic weapons, they had lost control, at least temporarily, of the 'constitutive process' of escalation.

The expected second Nyangatom attack did not materialize and, under pressure of hunger, the Mursi, who had evacuated the left bank of the Omo south of Gowa after the massacre, returned to cultivate there in the 1989-90 dry season. Still without automatic weapons and still feeling highly insecure, they only stayed long enough to take in the valuable flood harvest, a

pattern that was repeated the following year. Was the situation, then, slowly returning to normal? Or, rather, were the Mursi slowly and fatalistically accepting the inevitable and adapting themselves to a new political relationship with the Nyangatom, one of subordination?

An event which occurred at Kurum in January 1991 suggested otherwise. This was the long overdue creation, by means of a three-day ritual, called *nitha*, of a new male age set. The set, which was given the name Geleba, was the first to have been created since 1961. By becoming a member of an age set a man moves from the grade of *teru* to that of *rori* and, simultaneously, from that of *lsisi* (boy) to that of *hiri* (adult). Depending on the length of time since the last *nitha*, some of the new *rori* may be in their 40s, with wives and children of their own and therefore already treated, in domestic as well as public life, as *de facto* adults. The age span of the Geleba set was 15-45 years. Each of the three main territorial sections into which the Mursi are divided — Ariholi, Gongulobibi, Dola — holds its own *nitha*, in that order, Ariholi taking the lead because its territorial base is Kurum, the 'stomach' of the country. It was the Ariholi *nitha*, then, which took place at Kurum in January 1991; the other two sections held theirs about six months later. Because I had been monitoring the preparations for the *nitha*, which was delayed for several years, I was sufficiently confident of the timing of the Ariholi ritual to take a film crew from Granada Television in Manchester to Kurum to film it (Woodhead, 1991a, b).

The main events of the *nitha* took place in and around a specially constructed enclosure of branches with a tree at its centre and two openings, one opposite the other. The enclosure was built around a young tree, about six feet tall. The reason for the choice of this highly unimpressive tree was that it had a long life ahead of it. It would grow and flourish as, it was hoped, would the members of the new age set, who were thus identified not only with the tree but also with the place where it was rooted. The place where an important ritual is held is identified with the group, as the group is with the place. For example, rituals which mark the end of periods of hostility between the Mursi and their northern neighbours, the Bodi, act as boundary markers in the gradual encroachment by Mursi on Bodi territory, converting *de facto* Mursi occupation into *de jure* ownership (Turton, 1979).

By holding the *nitha* at Kurum, under the eyes of the Nyangatom as they sported their Kalashnikovs on the opposite bank of the Omo, the Ariholi Mursi were, among other things, making a symbolic defence of this 'actual terrain', which they still

considered unsafe for permanent reoccupation, but on the continued occupation of which their Mursi identity depended. In the future, if the Mursi claims to *de jure* ownership of Kurum were contested, they could point to the fact that the Geleba age set had been created there — and to the tree where the main events of the *nitha* had taken place.

There the story would have ended, had I not received information while revising this article for publication which suggests an even closer and more direct link between the *nitha*, the 1987 massacre and the preservation of Mursi identity. The information came from Jean Lydall who, with her husband Ivo Strecker, had recently returned from a visit to the Hamar, neighbours of the Mursi, whom they have known for over 20 years. They had been told that in March 1992 the Mursi had launched a large-scale attack on the Nyangatom, the delayed response to the 1987 massacre. The Nyangatom suffered heavy casualties, and some of the survivors were now living as refugees amongst the Kara and Hamar. The Mursi were now seen as a threat also by the Hamar who, in May, were removing their cattle from the Omo, south of the Mago junction, for fear of Mursi raids. The information is scanty but the source is reliable. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to attempt an interpretation of it, even though this will need to be checked and possibly modified in the light of further fieldwork. The main question which arises is how to explain this apparent reversal in the military fortunes of the Mursi.

The main question which arises is how to explain this sudden reversal in the military fortunes of the Mursi. At the time of my last visit in January 1991, they still considered themselves to be in serious danger from the Nyangatom, due to the lack of automatic weapons. They had not been able to acquire any from the government despite frequent appeals, their access to supplies coming from the west was still blocked by the Nyangatom, and the highland traders who were their traditional source of firearms were unwilling or unable to supply them with automatics.

Exactly a year later, Serge Tornay found the Nyangatom in what seemed an impregnable position and clearly unconcerned about the possibility of attack from the Mursi or any other group.

During the 1991–92 dry season the Nyangatom were at peace with their neighbours. In December and January they were harvesting bumper crops of sorghum, both from river banks and irrigated fields. The political atmosphere was nothing less than euphoric . . . It was said that no taxes would be levied (by the new government of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front [EPRDF]) and that political and economic autonomy would not be questioned any more. Being heavily armed, . . . safe from starvation and with

a rapidly growing population, they had many reasons to feel confident in their future. (1992, p. 17)

Tornay wisely adds that this optimism may have been exaggerated, since misfortunes would surely return in due course. But presumably neither he nor the Nyangatom would have predicted a major Mursi attack coming just two months later.

It is easy enough to explain why the Mursi attack came in March. The flood retreat crop from the Omo cultivation areas would have been harvested and safely stored, and the population which had occupied the Omo banks during the dry season (mainly women, girls and children) would have returned to the relative safety of the eastern grazing areas. The Omo would still be easily fordable in several places and, if the local rains had already started, the overcast skies and cool conditions would have made it easier for the war party to survive with only the water they were able to carry. But why this March? Two events of the previous year, one national and one local, probably account for this.

The national event was the fall of the government of Mengistu Haile Mariam in May 1991, when the rebel forces of the EPRDF entered Addis Ababa. This was followed by the disbanding of the former government's army and police force, which must have caused a flood of automatic weapons to come on to the market, and the virtual disintegration of the administrative and judicial system in the south of the country. In these circumstances it became possible for the Mursi to obtain Kalashnikovs in significant numbers through their established links with highland arms dealers.

The local event was the forming of the Geleba age set. The reported attack would certainly have been the responsibility of members of the new set, a large proportion of whom may have taken part in it. The members of a new age set seek to make a historical name for it by performing some daring, arduous or otherwise memorable feat, and circumstances had conspired to give members of the Geleba set just such an opportunity at the outset of its existence. In fact, the reported attack came at the earliest feasible moment in the life of the new set, which was not fully formed until the Dola section, the most populous, held its *nitha* in July or August 1991.

The possession of some automatic weapons was clearly an important factor in the decision of the Mursi to launch this attack, almost five years after the Nyangatom attack of February 1987. In view of what they told me in December 1987, however, it is

hardly likely that they would have felt it necessary to be as well armed as the Nyangatom, and they surely were not. If the connection suggested in this article between political identity, warfare and ritual activity has any merit, what does seem to have been crucial is the ritual transformation of the men who were called upon to carry out the attack. That is, until they were formed into an age set, they were not able to make this reply, in the sense that their action would not have communicated the appropriate and intended message both to themselves and to the Nyangatom.

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