

DAVID TURTON AND M. L. BENDER

1. Introduction

The Mursi are a group of transhumant pastoralists and cultivators, numbering about 5000 individuals, who live in the lower Omo valley of southwestern Ethiopia. Their territory, which lies about 100 miles to the north of Lake Turkana (Rudolf), is bounded on two sides by the Omo itself, and on a third by a tributary of the Omo, called Mako by the Mursi, and labelled "Mago" or "Usno" on most maps. At the height of the drought, in December and January, the Omo can be forded easily at several points along its course in Mursi country, but from approximately May to September, when it is swollen by the heavy rains which fall on the central Ethiopian plateau, it presents a serious obstacle to communication. The Mako too, although smaller than the Omo, is all but impassable during these months. It is largely because of these geographical facts that the Mursi have been able to maintain a high degree of independence and autonomy in relation to central governmental administration, even for this isolated part of Ethiopia. When they have been mentioned at all in the literature, it has been only in passing.

Their country can be divided into two main ecological zones: an area of bushland thicket, which borders the Omo to a width of about ten kilometers, and an area of wooded grassland, which rises gradually to the watershed dividing the Omo and the Mako valleys. These two areas correspond to the Mursi's two main subsistence activities: the cultivation of sorghum and the herding of cattle. They are able to practice both flood cultivation, planting along the banks of the Omo in October and harvesting in December and January, as well as shifting cultivation, planting in clearings in the bush well back from the river, after the March/April rains, and harvesting in June and July. Rainfall in Mursi country itself is well below the minimum required for regularly successful cultivation, but the Omo flood is fed by the heavy rains which fall during July and August over the Ethiopian plateau. Flood cultivation, therefore, is an important standby in years of poor rainfall.

Although they depend for well over half of their subsistence needs on cultivation, the Mursi nevertheless maintain the values and outlook of a predominantly pastoral people. They are obsessed with cattle, every significant social relationship being expressed and maintained by the exchange of stock animals. Indeed, their very classification, not only of the social, but also of the physical environment, cannot be understood except in relation to cattle. Herding must be confined to the wooded grassland east of the Omo, since the bushland which borders the river not only provides no grazing, but also harbors the tsetse fly, the vector of bovine sleeping sickness. This geographical separation of subsistence activities results in a pattern of transhumance which, although it takes place over a relatively small area (about 1,000 square miles), does not allow for any permanent settlement.¹

The name Mursi is that by which they are known to the local administration (Mursi country falls within the Hamar-Bako-Geleb

Awraja of Gemu-Gofa Province), and is one of several similar names by which they have been referred to in the accounts of travellers and explorers (e.g.: Mursu, Murzu, Murzi, and Murdi). They call themselves mun (sing. muni), but the present writers have decided to use the term Mursi, because it seems preferable to them not to introduce yet another name into the already confused and confusing picture of tribal nomenclature in the lower Omo area. Another name by which the Mursi refer to themselves, but only in ritual contexts and at public meetings or debates, is tama. Their northern neighbors, the Bodi, however, use this name to refer to the Mursi. Thus it is not the case, as some early writers had assumed (e.g.: Conti Rossini 1927), that the "Tdamá" are a separate group from the Mursi.

Bodi is the name used by the local administration to refer to the people who live north of the Mursi and east of the Omo. They are approximately equal in number to the Mursi, and their economy is also based on transhumant pastoralism and upon flood and shifting cultivation. They are called tumura (sing.: tumuri) by the Mursi, and call themselves meʔen (sing.: meʔenit). They have also been referred to as "Mekan" and "Tishena", though the latter term is perhaps best reserved for a group who live northwest of the Bodi, overlooking the Omo in the vicinity of Chebera, who speak a dialect of Me'en very similar to Bodi, and who now subsist almost entirely by means of shifting cultivation. The Mursi and Bodi languages are not mutually intelligible, though they are clearly very closely related (cf. Bender 1971: 176, Table 11). The two groups do not intermarry, and the relationship between them appears to be characterized by fairly long periods of peaceful coexistence and occasional outbreaks of all-out war.

Living among both the Mursi and the Bodi, but confined to the banks of the Omo, are a very small group numbering probably no more than 300 individuals, who call themselves kwegu, and who are called nidi (sing.: pidini) by the Mursi and yidi (sing.: yidinit) by the Bodi. Among themselves they speak their own language, which is closely related to Mursi and to Bodi, but not mutually intelligible with either. They speak the languages of these two groups fluently. The Mursi claim that Kwegu is particularly difficult to learn, a fact which is presumably related to the socially inferior position to which the Kwegu are allotted by both their Mursi and Bodi neighbors, who do not allow them to keep cattle, and who believe indeed that close contact between a Kwegu and cattle is extremely harmful to the latter. Thus, the Kwegu are not allowed to visit (except for short periods) the plains to the east of the Omo where the Mursi and Bodi keep their cattle. However, in return for gifts of honey and for their services as expert hunters and makers of dugout canoes (which they also navigate with a skill rare among Mursi and Bodi), they are provided by these latter groups with milk and with goats for bridewealth. The Kwegu call the Mursi murzu, a term which was adopted by some of the early travellers.

The Kwegu who live among the Mursi and Bodi know of the existence of a group of people having the same language as themselves who live further down the Omo, at approximately the point where it is joined by the Mako. These people use the name Kwegu for themselves, although they also acknowledge the name muguji, which is

used of them by the Kara (older literature: Kerre), with whom they live in close association.² Although some intermarriage has probably taken place in the past between these two groups of northern and southern Kwegu, present contacts between them appear to be extremely limited. The Kwegu language of the Muguji appears to be as strongly influenced lexically by Kara as that of the Kwegu living among the Mursi is by Mursi.

West of the Omo and south of the Maji plateau live a group who call themselves and who are called by the Mursi, cai (sing.: oaci), and who have also been referred to (especially by the early Italian writers) as Tid. They keep cattle and practice shifting cultivation, but have no access to flood land along the Omo. Many of them have settled on the lower slopes of the Maji-Sai plateau, where they have adopted a predominantly agricultural way of life. They speak a different dialect of the same language as the Mursi, with whom they intermarry and have close cultural and economic links. Indeed, the relationship between the two groups would appear to be analogous to that between the Bodi and the Tishena.

Further to the west live a group often called "Tirma" in existing literature (both this and "Tid" are probably best regarded as place names) and whom the Mursi call tirmaga (sg.: tirmagi). It is not clear whether the Tirmaga speak a different dialect from the Chai, but all three groups (Tirmaga, Chai and Mursi) certainly speak the same language and are culturally very similar. The Tirmaga and Chai, and probably also the Mursi, are called surma by the Omotic-speaking Dizi, who live on the Maji plateau, this being a term which appears frequently in the early Italian writings. Perhaps the most obvious (in the sense of immediately visible) indication of the cultural similarity of these three groups, and one which sets them apart from all the others mentioned above, is that their women cut and stretch their lower lips, eventually inserting clay lip-plates which may reach a diameter of four centimeters. Also characteristic of these groups is the institution of duelling, associated with the age organization, in which six-foot wooden poles, called dongen (sing.: donga) are used.

The Suri, another apparently distinct group who form part of the Mursi-Tirmaga-Chai complex, live south and east of the Tirmaga and Chai, and may number as many as 20,000 (Suri may turn out to be a useful generic name for all these groups). Their subsistence is mainly sorghum agriculture and collecting: they lost their cattle in the early 1970's through disease. They also have trading links with a group to the north of them, whose self-name is bale.

These, the Zilmamu of earlier accounts,³ number about 2000 and are sorghum agriculturalists. The Mursi call them bale@a (sg.: bale@i), and say that they cannot understand their language. However, many of the Bale understand Suri. It should be stressed that our knowledge of the peoples living west of the Omo, who have strong cultural links with the Mursi, is very rudimentary, compared with our knowledge of the Mursi themselves. These comments, therefore, are only tentative, and will almost certainly need to be revised after further intensive fieldwork has been carried out.

MURSI

Southwest of the Mursi live another group of pastoralist-cultivators, whom the Mursi call bume and who are also known by this name to the local administration. They call themselves nangatom and they speak the same language as the Turkana.⁴ Some of these people cultivate along the right bank of the Omo, opposite Mursi cultivation sites, and the two groups are thus brought into frequent and often hostile contact. The Bume call the Chai pikoroma, and the Mursi pikalabong. The latter name also appears on some maps as the name of the mountain range in Southern Mursi country.

See Chapter 18 for more information on Surma peoples.

Monograph No. 5
Occasional Papers Series
Committee on Ethiopian Studies

The [Non-Semitic Languages of Ethiopia]

Edited by M. Lionel Bender
Acting Series Editor, John Hinnant

Please send two copies of your review to
the African Studies Center, MSU, E.
Lansing, Mi. 48824

Copyright © 1976 by the Board of Trustees, Michigan State University
All rights reserved

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 76-42008

Printed in the United States of America

Published by the
African Studies Center
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan 48824

In cooperation with
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, Illinois