Hybridity at the Contact Zone: Ethnoarchaeological Perspectives from the Lower Omo Valley, Ethiopia

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The point is that contact zones are where the action is, and current interactions change interactions to follow.

(Haraway 2008: 219)

Introduction

In 2009 a programme of fieldwork started within the lower Omo Valley in southwest Ethiopia with an aim to ascertain the archaeological potential for later prehistoric and proto-historic inhabitation across the region. Previously, consensus that little or no evidence for such episodes was ever likely to be identified had filtered into broader policy that espoused an image of the valley as a pristine wilderness and communities today therein as comparatively recent interlopers upon an otherwise untouched landscape (Brittain and Clack 2012a). Three seasons of survey and trial

excavation have considerably altered this image, with evidence now emerging for rich and diverse occupation, perhaps not unbroken, from the Middle Stone Age through to the present. In many respects this is unsurprising; the early prehistory of the lower Omo Valley is recognised as a longstanding cultural crossroads, as illustrated by UNESCO's description of the valley upon its admission to the World Heritage List in 1980:

> The Lower Valley of the Omo is unlike any other place on Earth in that so many different types of people have inhabited such a small area of land over many millennia. It is believed that it was the *crossroads of a wide assortment of cultures* where early humans of many different ethnicities passed as they migrated to and from lands in every direction (UNESCO 2012, emphasis added).

The web of trade and exchange routes, migration and displacement, is most strikingly evident across the region with a visibly complex and unstable interdependence between groups that currently inhabit the valley (Wolde Gossa 2000: 19). There are nine distinct groups in the lower Omo Valley—Bodi, Chai, Dassanetch, Hamar, Kara, Kwegu, Mursi, Nyangatom and Suri—where six different languages are spoken derived from Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan dialects. Such diversity within a comparatively small region is unusual and research within this region necessitates critical engagement with issues of ethnic grouping, the character of cultural forms and the mobility of trans-group identity.

Primary engagement during the project has been with a group called the Mursi in a localised area known as Dirikoro and Ulum Holi. However, increasing engagement with the Mursi's northerly 'neighbours', the Bodi, has gradually developed (fig. 1). Each with a population of approximately 8000, the Mursi and Bodi are pastoral groups with a long tradition of exchange and reciprocation, violent conflict and peaceful resolution and a mutual cultural emphasis upon their cattle herds that bring both order and meaning to their worlds. It would be difficult for their lives to be more different from the authors' and there is an obvious cut between our

respective worldviews, practices of knowledge production and perspectives of time and heritage. The focus of the project has firmly attempted to embrace these issues as equally challenging, constrictive and constructive, by acknowledging that archaeological research does not take place in isolation from the spaces of engagement through which multiple stakeholders and worldviews are brought into contact (Hamilakis 2011: 402). In so doing, the archaeology of Mursiland's past takes into account its present and is further concerned with the impact that archaeological dialogue has upon Mursi engagements with what we, at least, regard as archaeological sites and narrative.[1] We contend that this allows for a tripartite investigation into cultural mixing whereby the example of a series of megalithic platforms acts as a dynamic contact zone. This is not envisaged as geographically bound, delimited space, but rather a temporal frontier that emerges through practice and in which differing perspectives are brought together not so much as an equal merger, but through a generative potency that is centred upon materiality. We argue that notions of hybridity are valuable to understanding this generative potency, but more so where emphasis is centred within diversity rather than laid upon the respective differences of participants.

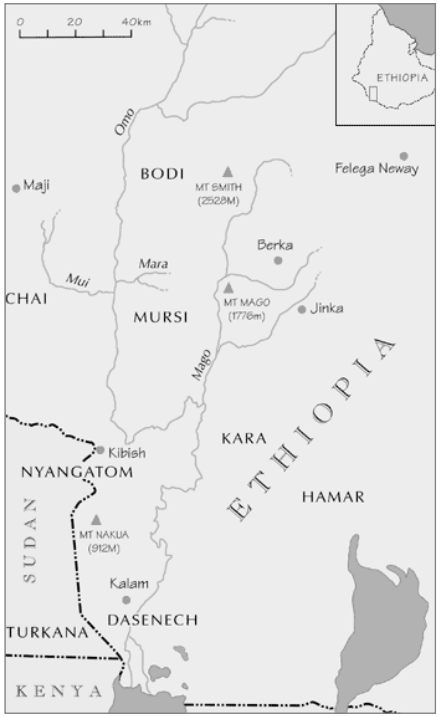

Fig. 1. Map showing the approximate current territories of Bodi, Chai, Mursi and some other groups in the lower Omo Valley.

1 This takes into account that Mursi and Bodi notions of time and heritage differ considerably from traditional 'Western' ideals (see also Turton and Ruggles 1978).

Cultures, Clans and Ethnicity in the Lower Omo Valley

Anthropological research within a number of the groups throughout the lower Omo Valley has largely confirmed the conception of cultures and ethnic groups that has become accepted within archaeological discourse: that these are historically particular, fluid and emergent not in isolation but through multiple scales of interaction. As Abbink (2000: 3) points out, this is not to say that categories of ethnic ties "have no meaning, or are arbitrary bricolages of cultural material", but rather that they are "a rich source of belonging" and display "a measure of internal cohesion" while at the same time being equally "dynamic and changing". The expression of these ties is varied, being mobile and emergent through a capacity for repeatability that is historically contingent and configured through practice in a material environment (see Brittain in press). And yet these often partial and entangled connections are rigidified in official bureaucratic discourse through representations of bounded and repetitive cultural forms, thereby essentializing group distinction (Abbink and Unseth 1998: 110; Latour 1993: 78).[2]

The reality for the lower Omo Valley is that material expressions of cultural form exist in a world of movement and contact and, as Basu and Coleman (2008: 313) explain, seemingly translate "from one geographical location to another, even as it is transformed in the process". Consider an example of Mursi ceremonial duelling contests (*thagine*) remarkable for their elaborate dress and ceremony and violent skill of striking an opponent with a wooden pole (*donga*). The *donga* (plural *dongen*) is prepared from a 2m long coppiced branch with a carved tip generally distinguishable from the duelling equipment of other Omo groups. However, since the 1960s a number of changes in the form of this tip have been noted from a generally smooth and slightly bulbous shape to a more pronounced bulb traditionally favoured by the Chai group to the west on the other side of the Omo River (figs 2 and 3).

2 As Abbink (2000: 4) points out, neither the desire nor the ability for local groups to intermix has been aided by the current state system and influx of globalising influences, with serious instability across the region escalating over the past 30 years. Since the mid-1980s an influx of Kalashnikov automatic weapons has heightened division and imbalances of power amongst groups (Turton 1993).

Fig. 2. Photograph of a Mursi duelling contest (*thagine*) taken in August 2010. Note the duelling weapons (*dongen*) and protective and decorative duelling equipment (*tumoga*).

Such merging and blending is difficult to trace and often matched with a heightened divergence in other cultural fields. Moreover, it is consequential of membership and ties that are largely contingent upon localised circumstances within an environment that is often fraught with tension and uncertainty. Indeed the reality is complex, with the category of Mursi identity, for example, comprising a collectivity of around a dozen

affiliate clans (*kabicho*, singular *kabi*) that do not necessarily share common origins (Turton 1979) or allies (e.g. Fukui 1994). Peoples' identification may not be exclusively or primarily Mursi, for receipt of Mursi identity denotes, according to Turton (1994: 17–18), a shared collective action within a territorial framework "rather than a tradition of common origin".[3] Mursi oral histories recount successive waves of small bands, perhaps of disparate clan sections, crossing from the southern banks of the Omo River approximately two centuries ago and moving northwards into the current Mursi territories. Furthermore, these Mursi oral traditions describe the forcible displacement of existing Bodi inhabitants by these new settlers, pushing them northwards into what is today Bodi territory (Turton 1988), although by contrast Bodi oral histories refer to a premeditated exit on account of the poor quality of the grass in comparison to lusher northerly grasslands (Brittain and Clack 2012a). In any case the inference is that the sense of a collective Mursi identity was formed at this time not through absorption of members of one ethnic group into another, but in the collective action of the movement itself and the development of shared practices that emerge in what Mursi refer to as the common search for a 'cool place'. Under these terms, 'place' and 'identity' are intricately fused into the conception of what it is to be Mursi. For example, the naming of and initiation into an age set (the principle institutional framework of political authority) takes place at a location chosen for its specific properties, notably a tree that will grow and outlast

Fig. 3. Bulbous tips found on modern wooden duelling weapons (*donga*, pl. *dongen*).

3 It is for this reason that Turton (1994: 19) defines Mursi identity as political rather than ethnic.

the age set, thereby attaching a particular territorial and social tag to that place (Turton 1994; Woodhead 1991). Place, mobility and materiality are integral to Mursi identity, but like the Mursi themselves are constantly on the move.

Terms of Engagement

Taken together the purposive collective actions of Mursi identity mentioned in the previous section are reminiscent of Kopytoff's (1987) frontier perspective in which (specifically African) societies are pulled together and constructed out of the fragments of existing cultural units. This 'African frontier' is a politically open space situated between distinctive organized societies and may be colonized in response to multiple factors including war, drought and famine. Internal to larger regions, the frontier is a zone into which elements of the broader region are drawn together into a new cultural form, thereby fusing distinctiveness with apparent similarity of cultural practices. However, in Mursi lifeways—as well as that of other lower Omo groups—the frontier is not a particular point of arrival from which engagement with other organised cultural or ethnic units ensues, blends and produces new forms, but is by contrast the normative condition through which it is possible for practice and identification to unfold; the manifestation and maintenance of an identity that may be considered to be Mursi is contingent upon a frontier that is constantly mobile and an "*ideal* place of arrival" forever upon the horizon (Turton 2005: 267, original emphasis).

The relational character of Mursi identity along with the juxtaposition of the importance to which Mursi associate a sense of place with the mobility of the frontier presents an interesting challenge for questions concerning engagement. The dynamic hybridity that Mursi interaction induces, in partnership with the long-term maintenance of normative values of what it is *to be* Mursi, is a fertile area for research, particularly of temporality in the encounter with a past landscape through archaeological excavation and survey in places that are very much explicit in contemporary Mursi affairs.

Hybridity

It is important here to clarify the sources from which our understanding of hybridity has received influence, as there appear to be multifarious definitions that are at times conflicting or, arguably, even detrimental to the aims for which they have been formulated (Fahlander 2007: 19). As an entry we have drawn from the works of Bhabha (1994), Clack (2011, in press) and Latour (1993) and note that hybridity concerns multiple scales of collective assemblies, whether this is a social group or a nation state, that are composed of diverse and partial elements, and conceptually defined in a practical and continuous process of entanglement. Importantly, we understand this as an engagement that is materially constituted in practical configurations of bodies, human and non-human, terms of which are always defined or negotiated in locally situated practices.

Dean and Leibsohn (2003: 5) query the use of the term hybridity "as a way of acknowledging the mixed descendancy of certain objects and practices" and articulate uncertainty as to the degree of awareness of the accountability to particular political orientations registered within its application. The context to which they refer is broadly European expansionism and hybridity as "the marking of particular kinds of difference" (Dean and Leibsohn 2003: 6). However, we would distinguish from this our own perspective towards hybridity in the context of the lower Omo Valley as a concern with the relationship of the past to the present through a political lens that is not embedded within issues of difference *per se*, but is instead concerned with the co-habitation and co-evolution of diverse participants often through unequal relationships within changing terms of engagement (see also Brittain and Overton 2013). Co-habitation examines the means by which conceptual boundaries are formed and subsequently bounded or breached and the means by which novel categories emerge or are submerged under localized and unequal conditions of knowledge and power. This does not aim towards a measure of the distance between different positions, but rather the changing degree of significance attached to qualities of otherness. Essentially, this embraces recognition that potentially "non-harmonious agencies and ways of living…are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories

and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures" (Haraway 2003: 7). Reference to cultural forms as hybrid is problematic, for it suggests the counter possibility that there exist authentic, non-hybrid forms, representable through discursive expression, and thereby accentuating distance in differentiation. Hybrid is therefore not a term that we employ. However, in the context of the contact zone hybridization is a useful means of articulating the generative and dynamic potency of terms of engagement as a process, on-going and transitory, entangled and unequal.

Contact Zones

We consider these terms of engagement through the example of a cluster of megalithic platforms first identified during archaeological survey in 2009 and subject to three seasons of investigation. The changing effect that this research has had on the local Mursi community is situated against interpretation of their past and present significance to documented oral testimony of both Mursi and Bodi identities tagged across the landscape. Importantly, the platforms are approached as contact zones which in this context provides analytical media for the analysis of multiple expressions of hybridization. In archaeology contact zones have been observed since at least the first quarter of the twentieth century, influenced in particular by perspectives emerging from geography concerning regions of considerable cultural interaction at the periphery of either state or topographic and ecological boundaries (Fleure 1917). In evolutionary biology contact zone dynamics provide important information about evolutionary processes, particularly hybridization of interacting lineages (Harrison 1990; Kuchta 2007). Along with reflections upon the social role of museums as contact zones for diverse stakeholder worldviews (Clifford 1997: 188–219), archaeology has only recently returned to the contact zone (Morrissey 2004; Peers 1999). This has taken place most notably through the influence of Pratt's (1991, 2008) reworking of the contact zone as a useful replacement for the frontier from within contexts of imperial encounter. Here the contact zone represents any space "in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with

each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt 2008: 8). Furthermore, this "invokes the space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect" (Pratt 2008: 8).

The principles of the contact zone have been espoused throughout the research programme in the lower Omo Valley with an approach advocating participation from Mursi and other 'stakeholders' (Brittain and Clack 2012a). There are postcolonial roots in both notions of the contact zone and of hybridity itself, although the principal motivation in the context of the lower Omo Valley is essentially for a creative and mutually informed outcome, and participatory archaeology, while not a methodology in its own right, should be accountable to particular local circumstances.

Benna Kulugto

Dirikoro is an area of the Mursi landscape renowned for its black soil, imbued with properties of strength and cosmological reference. Similarly, the white clay associated with Ulum Holi is aligned with properties of healing and spiritual purity. Both are situated at the north tip of the Arichukgirong, an elevated spur on the east side of the Dara range, a spine of mountainous volcanic rock bisecting the otherwise flat grassy plains of Mursiland. Dirikoro and Ulum Holi are set within the valley of the Elma River, one of a number of intersecting perennial water sources that flow from the range into the Omo River, and is an area seasonally occupied for sorghum cultivation.[4] Intensive survey has identified lithic assemblages of the Middle to Late Stone Age, along with stone-built architecture including circular platforms, stelae, cairns and enclosures.

The platforms have been the focus of further test excavation and are unique to eastern Africa (Brittain and Clack 2012b; Clack and Brittain 2011).

4 Increasing state pressure on pastoralist mobility is transforming the seasonal cycle of the Mursi population as a whole and Dirikoro inhabitants are currently uncertain as to the sustainability of long-term occupation in that area.

Named by local Mursi as *benna kulugto* ('stone circle'), these are clustered around the north landfall of the Arichukgirong either in pairs or as a larger cluster, and currently total to twenty-five examples (fig. 4). *Benna kulugto* range in size from only 2m to a considerable 26m in diameter and are comprised of multiple concentric rings of moderately sized rounded and cylindrical stones that are interrupted by a gully also filled with a line of stones that is consistently oriented to the northwest from the centre of the platforms irrespective of their position in the landscape (fig. 5). The stones themselves are likely to have originated from a number of sources, but do not seem to have been obtained locally. Excavation has shown that the centre of the platforms was a focus for deposition between the stones, namely of lithic debitage and highly fragmented bone with occasional articulated elements of cow feet. Burning is evident on some of the bone. A single radiocarbon date has provided a baseline date of the mid-eighteenth century AD which is broadly aligned with the oral histories for population movement and climatic fluctuations, the latter of which has also been illustrated in palaeoenvironmental analysis in the region and shows change towards greater exposure in an increasingly drier climate (Gil-Romera et al. 2012).

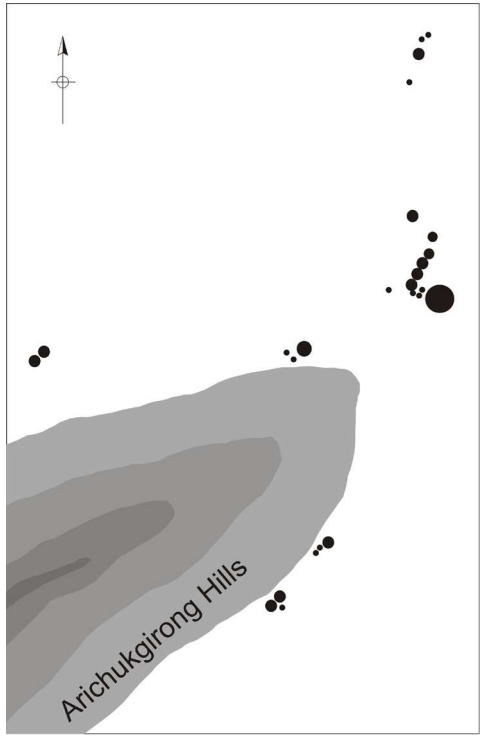

Fig. 4. Interpretive plan of the *benna kulugto* located around the northerly tip of an elevated spur of the Arichukgirong.

An important aspect to the project has been the on-going documentation of the changing character of *benna kulugto* within Mursi

Fig. 5. Photograph of *benna kulugto* platform feature 3.

oral traditions. In other words the means by which Mursi conceptualize and make sense of these platforms in light of archaeological investigations in which they are foregrounded is noted to be an issue of dialogue as well as revealing elements of these landscape features that may not fit comfortably within normative worldviews. During the first season of fieldwork 16 of the platforms were identified and exposed at Dirikoro, thereby revealing their unusual architecture and variable size, at this stage ranging between 2m and 12m in diameter. Lithic and bone deposits were recovered, although primarily from platform Feature 3, which was subjected to the most structured investigation. At this stage we harboured the possibility that these could be elaborate burial markers; however, Mursi interpretation was somewhat different, aligning these unfamiliar forms within an established narrative. This recounted the expulsion of a pre-existing Bodi population by Mursi settlers searching 'for a cool place' and explained the platforms as house floors designed to elevate occupants from wet ground, with a gully providing additional

drainage should the waters seep through the dwelling roof cover. This narrative simultaneously confirmed the presence of a structured pre-Mursi settled community, an architectural tradition emerging from a cooler and damper environment and the ultimate demise of that community and their replacement by Mursi inhabitants, along with their ultimate endurance. Lithic and bone debris was strategically overlooked.

In the second field season another nine platforms were identified, cleaned and recorded (including two at Ulum Holi) and platform Feature 5 was subjected to detailed excavation sampling. Increasingly the burial hypothesis was looking unlikely, with no sign of sub-platform features and the stones clearly placed upon an older sealed and unmodified land surface. In the ten months separating the first and second fieldwork programmes the Mursi interpretation of the platforms as houses had solidified into the oral historical narrative of Dirikoro. However, the finding of a platform substantially larger than any other at 26m diameter placed considerable doubt on the now received view of these as house floors. It was inconceivable to the Mursi that any dwelling could have been built to this size, particularly with the local scrub wood resources. Instead an alternative proposal was formed in which the *benna kulugto* were open-air artificially raised surfaces or 'sleeping platforms' protecting users from the damp ground conditions.

These narrative manoeuvres illustrate changing terms of engagement that enable local Mursi to comprehend the *benna kulugto*. However, the terms of engagement are not simply grounds for an interpretative exercise; instead this represents movement through a temporal frontier in efforts to maintain attachment to the significance of a particular place. For example, the specific location of the *benna kulugto* in Dirikoro is of particular importance to Mursi oral histories, with a sacred *ragai* tree growing within the cluster of platforms. The shade of *ragai* trees are used for public meetings and debate, initiations and various ceremonial sacrifices of cattle, and are found across Mursiland, but this particular *ragai* tree is considered to be the first and is held with notable esteem (see Clack and Brittain 2011). While at Ulum Holi two *benna*

kulugto were uncovered from within the vicinity of a Mursi burial ground and adjacent to two Mursi stone enclosures utilised in elaborate cattle healing ceremonies.[5] These practices and architectures, combined with a distinctive and potent geology, are integral to Mursi place-making at Dirikoro and Ulum Holi, but also clearly belong to a much deeper history. It is therefore of notable significance that soil chemical analysis carried out during intensive excavation of one of the platforms (platform Feature 5) has shown high phosphate signatures at both its centre and along its gully that, with areas of burning around the outside of the platform in addition to the treatment and deposition of bone, points strongly towards practices of cattle sacrifice (Brittain and Clack 2012b), perhaps during an episode of increased social pressure.

As mentioned earlier, it is perhaps of little surprise that Bodi oral histories of Mursi migration differ to that of the Mursi. However, there is a parallel significance that the Dirikoro region holds within each of these accounts. Bodi state that the Ajit, one of the three authentic clans that make up the proto-Mela from which the Bodi originated, resided within these lands and today represent one of five clans from which the office of *komorut* ('priest') may be appointed (Fukui 1994: 39–44). Importantly, individual *komorut* are linked with their own stone platforms (*kôroch*) used within Bodi settlements for sacrificial ceremonies. These differ markedly with the *benna kulugto* with regards to form, but appear to resemble these earlier structures in other ways. Responding to photographs of the excavated *benna kulugto*, Bodi elders pronounced that contemporary problems within Bodi society in part arise from improper ceremonial procedure that is otherwise illustrated in the *benna kulugto* design and it may be interesting to follow the emerging form of future *kôroch* platforms. In any case, the correspondence binding *komorut*, *kôroch* and Dirikoro/Ulum Holi provides additional layering to the generative potency of the *benna kulugto* as a contact zone.

5 One of these ceremonies, named *biolama*, was witnessed by the authors in 2010.

Discussion

The entangled web of clan affiliation, alliance and complex codes of interaction in the lower Omo Valley establishes relatively open-ended systems of identification through which dynamic blending of cultural forms unfolds. Nonetheless, there are contact zones across which particular repertoires of meaning are assembled into intelligible patterns, notably of material arrangements such as *dongen* or the *benna kulugto*, that are contingent upon historical circumstances but nonetheless lend consistency to broader group identification. However, the task presented to researchers working with these patterns is not a teasing out of hybrid forms identified as amalgamations of disparate cultural or contextual traits. Instead we argue that in the lower Omo Valley hybridization is the condition upon which diverse assemblies are brought together. Hybridization presents a tension and constraint upon which considerable labour and adjustment is expended and within these terms of engagement it is remarkable that any consistent pattern of group identification is maintained at all. The point here is that assemblies of bodies and materials contain a powerful generative potency, the outcome of which may be uncertain and requiring of considerable hermeneutic labour (Brittain in press).

Benna kulugto serve as assembly points or contact zones, bringing together materials and bodies, but also breaching a temporal frontier. As contact zones these are neither fixed nor static; they are mobile as photographic images or within oral narratives and vibrate and resonate far beyond their physical station (e.g. Deleuze 1993: 86–94). As a part of the mobility of pastoral livelihoods the significance of *benna kulugto* is shaped along with other people, places and things by the character of their distinct journey; similarly, migratory passages are shaped by their materiality and emplacement (Basu and Coleman 2008: 317). In the lower Omo Valley these include the cyclicity of seasonal transhumance, colonisation of an ideal frontier, trade pathways, inter-ethnic relations of patronage, cattle raids and conflict situations. These form the conditions for assembly, for hybridization. And clearly as an archaeological object

for study the *benna kulugto* have facilitated dialogue and participation within an interpretative process that will continue indefinitely.

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