

Place-making, participative archaeologies and Mursi megaliths: some implications for aspects of pre- and proto-history in the Horn of Africa

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Here we present the context and nature of findings from the first season of archaeological survey and trial excavation in an area of Ethiopia's Lower Omo Valley. With the exception of well-documented early hominin discoveries, the region has previously been overlooked as a wilderness absent of human inhabitation. Such an outlook has fostered various consequences for strategies of legal, research and conservation policy within the regional boundaries of Mursiland in particular. In this paper recent discoveries of megalithic circular platforms and other archaeological remains are introduced against their dynamic local and regional placement within present-day understandings of place. Furthermore, we emphasise the value of a participative archaeology research framework in which accountability is directed towards common ground between multiple "stake-holders" within the design and dissemination of the research agenda. This demonstrates important possibilities for intricate understandings of wilderness and landscape linked to heritage, conservation, development and tourism.

Keywords: archaeology; landscape; Mursi; participation; stone platform; wilderness

Southwestern Ethiopia "is an area whose Holocene archaeology is essentially unknown".¹

"The later archaeology of southern Ethiopia remains almost completely Unknown."²

"Apart from the known and the unknown, what else is there?"³

In many important respects the archaeology of the Lower Omo Valley of Ethiopia is in its infancy. Nonetheless research is currently underway within the land of the Mursi, whose population of 10,000 forms one of the eight distinct ethnic groups of the Lower Omo. This is directed towards an understanding of changes in the expression of the relationship between landscape and identity in the Lower Omo, notably the pre-Mursi community response to environmental pressures, and the location of archaeological remains in contemporary Mursi oral histories. This article offers a preliminary report on archaeological investigations along the Elma River Valley in Mursiland (Figure 1). The aim is to contextualise the disciplinary and social challenges faced by contemporary research into practices of megalithic construction and usage in the African Rift Valley. It is argued that archaeology is in a continual engagement with practices of place-making at multiple levels of accountability, simultaneously crossing local, regional and global domains.

The first section, focusing on the local perspective of place-making, introduces a programme of survey and trial excavation, begun in the summer of 2009, that has revealed evidence for multiple periods of human occupation in the form of surface lithic and pottery assemblages. The most striking and unusual discovery was a cluster of at least 14 unique "megalithic" platforms constructed from concentric arrangements of large stones.⁴ At issue here is the Mursi understanding of these archaeological features, and the means by which newly revealed and unfamiliar landscapes are incorporated into Mursi oral tradition.

The unusual nature of these architectural features, coupled with the preliminary character of investigation, makes for cautious interpretation at this early stage. This is taken into account in the second section, covering regional scales of place-making, in which the interpretative possibilities suggested by our fieldwork and, by comparison, with material assemblages recorded elsewhere in East Africa are placed against the standard presentation of the Lower Omo Valley as a "wilderness". The nature of the archaeological engagement in Mursiland has been moulded by concern for the character of archaeological reportage and inquiry and its relationship to local explanatory narratives. The third section describes the socio-political consequences of archaeological research and practice in a landscape cast by various legal and institutional agencies as a pristine wilderness, and highlights the need for a participative archaeology in which accountability is directed towards finding common

ground between interests of multiple “stake-holders”. This will demonstrate possibilities for intricate and alternative understandings of wilderness linked to heritage, conservation, development and tourism. Thus, while the opportunities and challenges presented here are necessarily focused on the Omo Valley, wider regional significance can be inferred.

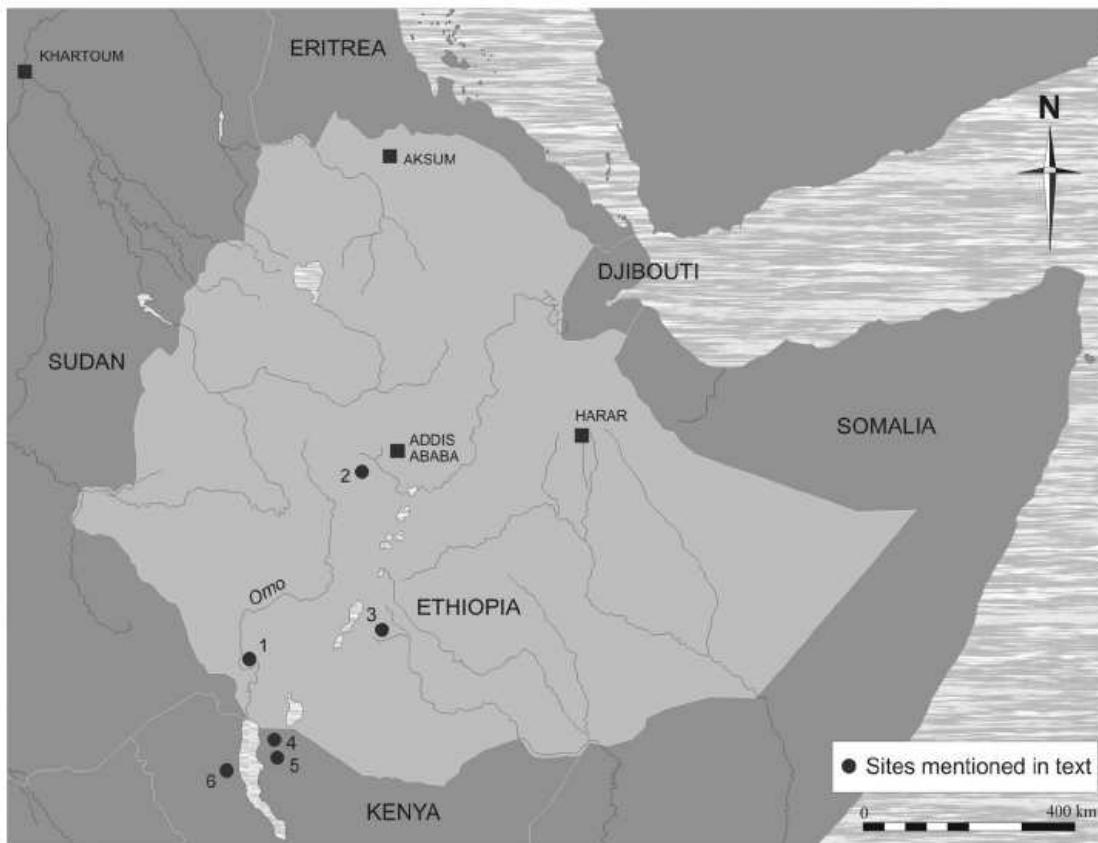


Figure 1. Map showing the location of the present area of archaeological interest in southwestern Ethiopia and several other archaeological sites referred to in the text.

Key: 1. Dirikoro; 2. Tiya; 3. Tuto Fela; 4. Lokeri; 5. Jarigole; 6. Kalakol.

Local place-making

During the 1990s a number of innovative readings of landscape in archaeology and anthropology revealed a wealth of complex interconnections between person and place, questioning not only the relationship between these terms, but also the fundamental basis of their meaning.⁵ This redirection within an understanding of landscape has also led to scrutiny of just what it is to be a person in the world. For example, Julian Thomas refers to the world as a “horizon of intelligibility” whereby meaning is disclosed through engagement, inhabitation, or dwelling.⁶ Under these conditions of intelligibility, one does not dwell or inhabit a pre-prepared world of culture and meaningfulness, but one participates in the disclosure of meaning by dwelling amongst others, human and non-human, linked by what Tim Ingold calls a meshwork of locales in a continual process of coming-into-being.⁷ To dwell in or inhabit this “place-world” is to form meaningful connections that extend far beyond individual spaces, and ones that are embodied and practised through movement between locales.⁸ Intelligibility, therefore, is inscriptive and manifested through the uniqueness of experience and a collective motion towards familiarity; and place, far from a container for the enactment of life, is a setting of situated relationships for the unfolding of identities. Place and identity are therefore intricately connected, inscribing one with the other.

The Mursi sense of place, as David Turton has argued, is one continually progressing towards a “movable frontier” or an “ideal place of arrival” rather than being confined to a boundary or territory.⁹ This is an ongoing practice of placemaking and self-reproduction, a trail of emplacement

through wayfaring, happening, naming and storytelling. These concepts of place-making will be referred to throughout the following discussion.

Many areas across southwest and northeast Ethiopia have been subject to archaeological excavation over the past 100 years. However, investigations in the Lower Omo Valley have their origins in the 1960s with primacy noticeably weighted towards the emergence of hominid cognitive and motor capabilities.¹⁰ Pioneering excavations around the broader landscape of the Omo Valley, particularly along the Fejej Plain, continue to report important palaeoanthropological discoveries.¹¹ By contrast, little is known about the later prehistory and proto-history of this landscape, although the possibilities for an archaeological understanding of later human inhabitation have been noted.¹² In spite of this potential, the landscape of the Lower Omo has slipped into a conceptual void risking the legitimisation of a landscape history projecting an image of pristine natural wilderness absent of past human inhabitation. As described below, the results from the first season of fieldwork indicate that such an image is inappropriate for either the past or the present.

(i) Background to the project

The potential for archaeological research was highlighted to the authors during conversation with David Turton, who for almost 40 years has carried out research amongst the Mursi. In 1973, Turton had made a photographic record of a number of unusual stone formations scattered across an area known by local informants as Dirikoro. These formations were overgrown with vegetation, and similar in appearance to local geological outcrops. In spite of this, it was possible to identify a careful and unusual formality in the arrangement of the stones that was suggestive of architectural design akin to a platform structure. Nonetheless, Turton's informants were adamant that these were not of Mursi construction, and directed the origins of the platforms to the pre-Mursi inhabitants of the landscape, the fate of whom was uncertain. The complexity found within this narrative is of particular interest, for it explains the presence of the platforms through an environmental history. According to Mursi oral narratives, the platforms were constructed during a time when the climate was considerably wetter than the present dry conditions. Their function, according to the narrative, was as house floors (*dori kiango*), covered by a roof so to provide refuge for the occupants from the damp conditions. The Mursi name for these platforms is *Benna* ("stones") *kulugto* ("making a fence"), expressing the approximate meaning to "encircle an area with stones", although they are also sometimes referred to as *benna be zou oudjio be kingi* ("stones people put there a long time ago"), which highlights some of their ancestral mythic qualities.

Correlation of the Mursi oral narrative with historical events is problematic. Mursi arrival into the lands they currently inhabit is thought, on the basis of remembered but defunct age-sets, to extend over multiple generations, covering approximately two centuries.¹³ This timescale would broadly correspond with a period of high aridity or drought observed through lake sediment cores elsewhere in East Africa from approximately 1800CE, before which over 500 years of comparatively high precipitation or moisture endured.¹⁴ This signifies the potential for correlating aspects of oral narrative to scientific data. However, the security of the information regarding megalithic architecture is less certain. For example, in both Turton's photographs and during the recent investigations the *Benna kulugto* platforms held no resemblance to any house floors that had previously been observed along the Omo Valley, past or present. The archaeological fieldwork is designed to answer some of the implications of these issues.

(ii) Investigating the *Benna kulugto*

An initial survey and trial excavation was carried out at Dirikoro in the summer of 2009. Fourteen *Benna kulugto* platforms have been identified so far, and it is likely that further survey will reveal additional platforms and related structures or deposits. In this first season of fieldwork that platforms were recorded at three separate locations each aligned in series over approximately 400 m in a north_south orientation (Figure 2).¹⁵ The size of the platforms vary in diameter from 2.5 m up to 12.5 m, but each had been constructed through a common architectural grammar whereby a gulley projected from the centre of the structure to its outer limit, consistently, with only one exception, oriented in a north-westerly direction. In some of the smallest platforms the gullies were open corridors to the centre, but in most cases these had been filled by a single line of large stones.

During the process of uncovering these Benna kulugto the Mursi response appeared to combine intrigue with surprise. The quantity and architectural formality of the platforms was previously unrecognised. However, with little apparent debate or discussion, interpretation of the structures was ultimately manoeuvred into comfortable familiarity; that is, a raised floor within a circular house. Despite the architectural formality of the unusual gullies, these presented little barrier to this interpretation. They even added strength to the narrative by being identified as a drain that could discharge surface water from inside the presumed dwelling. Unsurprisingly, when asked what materials the dwelling may have been constructed from, a mirror-image of contemporary Mursi dwelling spaces was described (Figure 3). And yet many differences are apparent between the floor surfaces of Mursi dwellings and the symmetrical design of the Benna kulugto. For example, Mursi dwelling floors are little more than 2 or 3 metres in diameter, and often comprise of soft dung spread over cleared earth, whilst in rarer examples small rounded stones may be gathered into a circle on cleared ground, and then covered with soil to make a flat surface. In no cases that we observed were there any forms of ground drainage. In spite of this, the Mursi narrative required little or no explanation for the unusual traits found with the Benna kulugto, such as the variation in size, the use of large stones from a variety of sources, the presence of a gully, and the linearity of their arrangement across the landscape. In response to the revelation of something previously unknown in the landscape in the form of the Benna kulugto, sameness and difference were infolded within the oral narrative, and intelligibility achieved through an overlay of the familiar image of Mursi domestic space.

Of greater challenge to the process of infolding was the integration into Mursi oral narrative of the fragments of material culture found between the stones of the Benna kulugto. During excavation hundreds of small fragments of burnt and unburnt animal bone of various species were recovered, along with flakes of unmodified chipped stone possibly resulting from a substantial reduction process. Informants afforded little explanation for these residues, effectively embracing a status of the unknown, or at best provided a best-fit rationalisation for the bone as the remains of consumption practices. Neither of these assemblages could easily be equated with either domestic consumption or strictly utilitarian production. Such reasoned benightedness towards that unfamiliar to the Mursi worldview is perhaps unsurprising. Indeed, Turton has described the appropriation by the Mursi of “convenient fictions” used to explain the influx of new knowledge such as glass beads and rifles.¹⁶ The archaeological results were similarly reconfigured into pre-existing local knowledge structures which, as described in more detail below, has very real implications, both theoretical and methodological, for the research effort.

There is an alternative explanation that may be explored regarding the material residues of chipped stone and bone found within the platform structures. A small evaluation trench was opened to characterise one of the smallest of the Benna kulugto. In addition to collecting further samples of bone and chipped stone, two features were identified and excavated. One was a shallow pit or hollow beneath the stones at the centre of the platform, whilst the other was a small circular pit, about 25 cm in depth, and located a few inches outside the perimeter of the platform.



Figure 2. Three monumental platforms in a linear series at Dirikoro.



Figure 3. Contemporary Mursi hut of a design typical to many small settlements near Dirikoro.

To account for these observations we returned to a series of Turton's photographs from Dirikoro in 1973. Again these were enlightening, for they clearly showed that some of these stone structures incorporated long elongated stones placed upright at an angle and serving no apparent structural purpose. In the photographs these resembled stelae sometimes found in association with burials and ceremonial or sacrificial spaces across many parts of Eastern Africa, from prehistory to the present, and it is possible that the small pit outside the platform once held one of these stela, no more than 40 cm in diameter. The artefactual assemblage may have been connected with the construction and use of such a monument through dressing of stelae and a range of associated practices. If this is the case, then clearly the stelae had been removed in living memory, sometime between 1973 and the present. The removal and reuse of stelae for building or other purposes is not uncommon elsewhere along the Rift Valley, and has been noted at megalithic sites to the west of Lake Turkana.¹⁷ An explanation was not forthcoming from Mursi informants, which may indicate inaccuracy in our interpretation (stelae are not found in Mursi oral narratives), or silent recognition of the archaeological value placed upon the Benna kulugto by foreigners (herenji) to Mursi land. Clearly this is an issue requiring further investigation. However, what can be placed into context is the importance of a local megalithic tradition to the evolution of regional megalithic architecture.

(iii) Megalithic traditions

The presence of megalithic structures at Dirikoro, either in the form of substantial platforms or stelae, places it within the broad traditions of megalithic construction that have been identified throughout East Africa, often in concentrated "zones", and in particular along the Rift Valley.¹⁸ These traditions comprise a range of structures, and are associated with a variety of practices expressed in a multitude of ways. Only a few radiocarbon dates exist for these structures, meaning that understanding of individual site sequence and broader geographic relationships is limited. For example, "disc" or platform monuments have been recorded on the borderlands of Eritrea, Sudan and Ethiopia that date from the mid-third millennium BCE to the mid-fourth century CE.¹⁹ Similar structures have been noted along the northern Rift Valley in Djibouti and Somalia, for which no dates are currently available.²⁰ In Ethiopia the oldest dates for megalithic structures come from portal dolmens in the Harar, stretching back to at least 1500 BCE.²¹

Closer to Mursiland, along the central and southern Rift Valley, a long tradition of megalithic construction has been observed, with the erection of stelae taking place between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries CE (Figure 4). Around Lake Turkana, approximately 110 km south of Dirikoro, evidence for the erection of pillar alignments and funerary cairns has provided dates at least between the third millennium BCE to the third century BCE.²² To the west of Dirikoro, in southern Sudan,

megalithic stelae, pyramid monuments and circular cairns are known to have been constructed until recently (Figure 5).²³ Likewise, stelae continue to be erected to this day throughout the territories of the Konso and Arsi Oromo groups to the northeast of Dirikoro (Figure 6).²⁴ Often engaged with ceremonial usage, they are also sometimes associated with stone cairns for burial.

A future programme of targeted sampling will place the structures at Dirikoro into a clearer timeframe comparable to those found throughout the Rift Valley. Chronology aside, the morphology of the Benna kulugto embodies various traits found at other megalithic sites, whilst presenting an overall unique form. This would position the Benna kulugto platforms into a cross-cultural tradition of architecture that spans a timeframe of over 3500 years. Moreover, this makes it difficult to support the Mursi interpretation of the Benna kulugto as house floors and, perhaps, their recent antiquity in these narratives. Nonetheless, long phases of use and re-use, albeit for different purposes to that carried out upon their original construction, may have taken place on the platforms at Dirikoro.

The physical endurance of the Benna kulugto within the Dirikoro landscape is in part a result of the resilience of stone, the size of which within the platform structures would make their eradication difficult. It is this durability that may stand out in a landscape that is otherwise rapidly evolving and organic, and may have prompted continued or episodic use over long periods of time by many different communities. It is of interest, therefore, that the location of the Benna kulugto has maintained significance for the Mursi in the present day. In essence, therefore, these places also have their own “life history”²⁵ or “rock biography”²⁶. Additionally, as will be considered below, participatory fieldwork assists the archaeological interrogation of places for it grants the opportunity to record their long-term involvements in biographical fashioning.

(iv) Biographies of place

The notion of biography is an area of study into megalithic sites that is often overlooked, with a fixation on origins dominating the interpretative account. By implication, therefore, such accounts are precluded by an overriding concern with the design or morphology of megalithic features, attending to an architectural blueprint through shape, orientation and form. This presupposes the role of an architect rather than a community in megalithic traditions, and foregrounds origins rather than a multiplicity and longevity of meaning, purpose and use.²⁷ In this instance biography is represented as singular and purified, when in fact the monumental location may be subject to multiple understandings and multiple biographies over time. Biography when viewed as singular and purified overlooks an appreciation of sequential usage and changing practices of engagement with architecture, effectively objectifying “place” as fixed, static, and translatable through archaeological discourse. This risks the reduction of architecture and place into separate domains of experience and objective study. An alternative means of approaching architecture and place is by first considering notions of dwelling before that of building.²⁸ As such, it is helpful to approach the importance of place as experienced through dwelling by also thinking about landscape as an entity with a biography open to be “read” through multiple engagements over time.



Figure 4. Some of the impressive standing stelae from Tiya World Heritage Site, Sodo Woreda, Southern Ethiopia.

The landscape of the Benna kulugto provides an interesting context for thinking about the malleability of oral narratives in the construction of identity and intangible heritage. Further documentation of local information is required here, but some initial statements will suffice. The name Dirikoro is often described as “strong” and that it “is good for spiritual things”. Literally translated, Dirikoro means “dark earth”, owing to a distinct black soil that is found in patches around the immediate landscape of the Benna kulugto platforms. This dark earth is regarded as a powerful media for spiritual connection, and these properties may be transferred when appropriately daubed onto the face and the body by a priest (komoru). Notable locations across Dirikoro are preferred sources for the extraction and ritual preparation of dark earth, a number of which lay in the vicinity of the Benna kulugto. The location of the Benna kulugto is charged with significance for the present day inhabitants of Dirikoro owing to a particular tree from the Ragai category (*Tamarindus indica*) sacred to the Mursi and integral to oral history. More than any other of the Ragai sort, this tree is considered to have been the only substantial tree in the landscape during the arrival of Mursi into Dirikoro, and under its shade it was used by the male elders for public meetings, initiations and sacrifice. Testimony states that the Ragai continues for this purpose today, and cattle bones and horn cores may be found littered upon the ground surface beneath its shade. Important for discussion here is the Ragai’s spatial position in relation to the Benna kulugto, for the most northerly cluster along the linear arrangement of platforms incorporates the Ragai directly within its path. Coincidence this may be, but it is tempting to consider a more connected relationship between Benna kulugto, dark earth sources and the Ragai in practices of place-making at Dirikoro.



Figure 5. Konso monument from Southern Ethiopia, dating from the early twentieth century CE, consisting of stone cairn, standing stone pillars, and wooden ornamentals or waqaa, from the photographic archive of Sir Wilfred Thesiger (accession number 1998.345.8, # Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford).

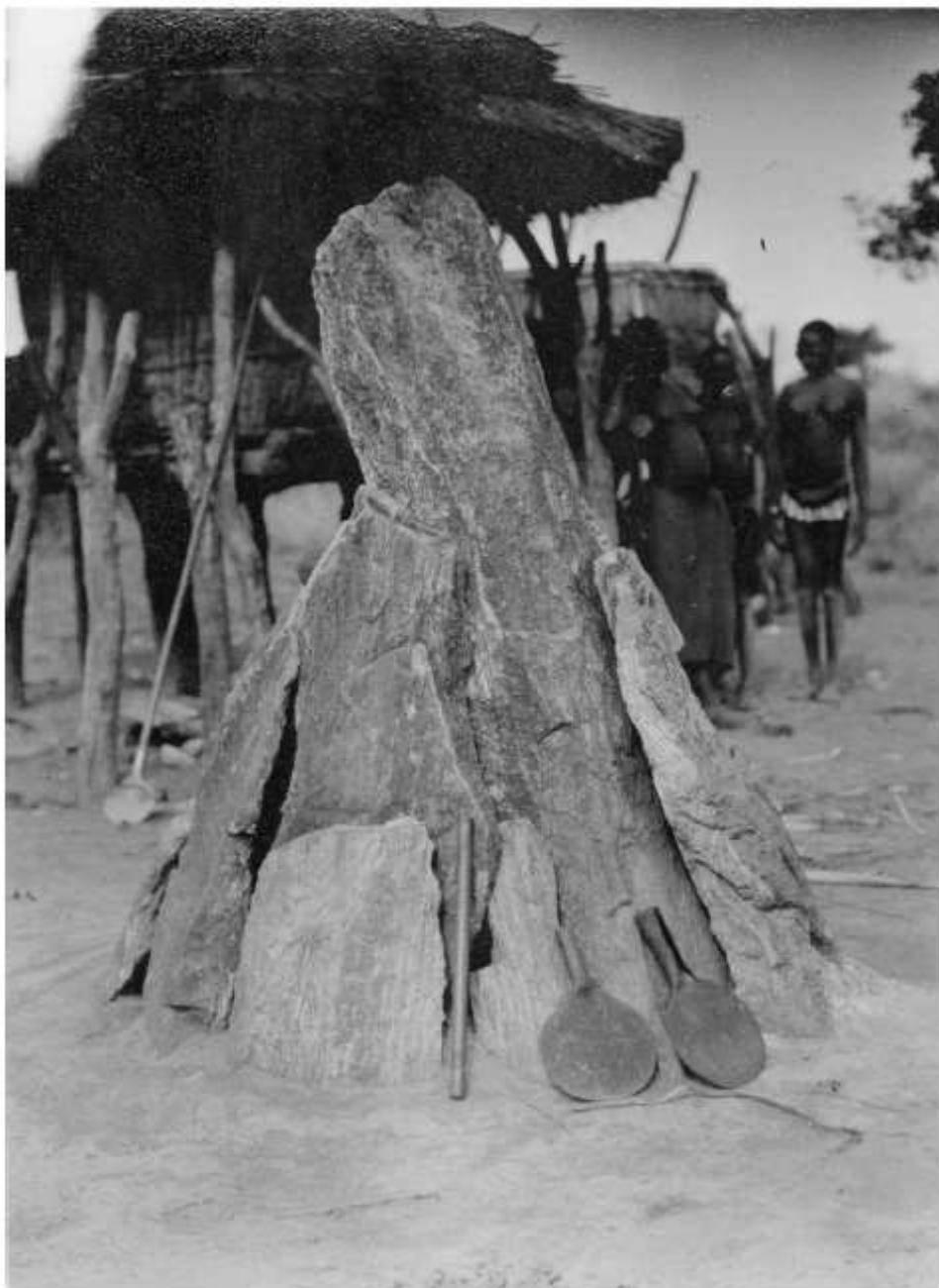


Figure 6. Moro Meza megalithic “pyramid grave” in homestead, photograph from 1927, from Amadi District, Southern Sudan, consisting of a small mound of earth with large slabs of stone leaning against each other and over it, from the photographic archive of E.E. Evans-Pritchard (accession number 2004.130.37634.1, #Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford).

Recalling the formation of a Mursi age set in 1991, Turton has described the importance of place to the practice of initiation into adulthood.²⁹ Here an enclosure of small stones was used to encircle the base of a tree selected for its likelihood of survival during the life of the age set. Similarly, trees such as the Ragai also feature within narratives of place-making that recount the “continuing effort to find and occupy “a cool place” in Mursi oral histories.³⁰ Once found, these places are inscribed by the sacrifice of animals and the scattering of ox chyme in an act of purification.³¹ The combination of the Ragai and the Benna Kulugto at Dirikoro embody similar traits of place-making, the inscription of which is further enhanced by the availability of dark earth and the occasional long distances travelled by Mursi for its extraction, collection and use in a variety of medicinal and spiritual practices. The biography of Dirikoro offers an interesting perspective on Mursi placemaking since the permanency of the Benna kulugto, and the continued referencing of Dirikoro lies in juxtaposition to an otherwise movable frontier. Moreover, the longevity of this biography and the need for renegotiation of the Mursi oral

narrative in light of archaeological evidence suggests that memory-work is malleable and contestable. Indeed, the Mursi oral history depicts the combination of previous inhabitants' place-making that has endured in absentia through the presence of the Benna kulugto, and the symbolic reference, via the Ragai, to the origins and success of Mursi entry into Dirikoro.

Regional place-making

Whilst a major aim of the project at Dirikoro has been to understand the significance of archaeological remains to the worldviews of contemporary communities, it is also an imperative task to situate interpretation of past communities into a regional, and potentially global, perspective. This section presents the challenges faced in current archaeological research towards this endeavour, and explores how place-making in the past may be found in the material record.

(i) Thinking through contextual wildernesses

Possibilities for regional contextualisation of archaeological evidence in the Lower Omo Valley are limited. This is due to a collection of issues that together fabricate a contextual wilderness. From the outset it needs to be recognised, as Andrew Smith does, that "the archaeology of pastoralism in Ethiopia is at best weak".³² This makes it a real challenge to confidently link material cultures and megalithic traditions to any specific ethnic identities in the past. In a broad historical perspective of the Lower Omo Valley, and specifically the area comprising the archaeology of Dirikoro, it may be posited that assorted groups and or their ideas have repeatedly passed through the landscape in waves of colonisation. However, actually making statements about the identity of those engaged with megalithic traditions presents a major problem. Two key points need to be addressed here, one relating to the nature of the material data, and the other concerning the nature of archaeological inference. For clarity these are discussed separately.

First, certain groups are likely to have been responsible for a range of monumental forms, but delineations of individual group traits will therefore not be apparent simply on the basis of structural equivalency. Additional lines of evidence are required. These issues may be illustrated from comparison between two so-called Namora'tunga sites along the shores of Lake Turkana, less than 80km from the Lower Omo Valley: the Kalokol (Namora'tunga I) and Lokeri (Namora'tunga II) megalithic complexes, each thought to be generally contemporaneous to each other and linked within the same cultural complex (Figures 7 and 8).³³ Each contain numerous stone cairns, low mounds, large upstanding basalt pillars, petroglyphs and vestiges of mortuary practice with other elements of material culture and a spatial organisation that are deemed comparable. However, there are significant differences between the two sites, other than their geographic separation. Both sites are situated on the ancient beaches of Lake Turkana, formed about 6000 years ago with a recession in the water level.³⁴ Lokeri lies in the east and Kalokol to the west. A morphological difference between the two sites based on spatial organisation is that Kalakol is organised around two double rows of pillars orientated east-west and north-south, with an arc of cobbles delineating the perimeter of the monument. Lokeri, by comparison, is free from these associations. Material deposition also contrasts between the sites, with Neolithic nderit pottery identified at Lokeri, and yet being absent at Kalokol.³⁵ Functional differences have been offered by various authors, particularly with claims that the Kalokol megaliths were aligned in such a way as to be used for observance of celestial formations, in addition to its mortuary purpose.³⁶

Second, an examination of the archaeological literature illustrates a continued preponderance towards pre-colonial traditions of ethnic reconstruction, primarily constructed through oral historical accounts. Whilst these have been revised in historical circles such revisions have failed to translate across the disciplines and into archaeology. In fact, it is now a commonplace belief that cultural communities in the region have "been continually created by partial permutations from a common fund of diverse ethnic strands".³⁷ Thus rather than making vague references to culture-historic groups,³⁸ it seems more appropriate to concur with John Bower when he asserts, in reference to cultural identity, that such questions are unanswerable given the "fluidity of past ethnic boundaries in some parts of Africa".³⁹ Moreover, it seems likely that we are not dealing with bounded, monolithic ethnic groups at all but rather groups with permeable boundaries and identities that shift through time and from place to place with material culture intimately involved in the manipulation of intra- and inter-group relations.⁴⁰ Thus given the archaeological data currently available it seems sagacious to note ethnicities undergoing flux and divert attention away from origins and towards mechanisms. In other words, there is a need to develop a concern for cultural contact, relation and change.



Figure 7. Kalokol stone pillar site (Namora'tunga I), Lake Turkana, Northern Kenya
(photo: Larry Robbins).

With this re-orientation of enquiry it becomes possible to recognise that commonalities between distant traditions should not be overly surprising given pastoral subsistence strategies and their dependency on the supportive horticultural and husbandry practices of peripheral groups. For example, Galaty has noted how the Maasai and Maa expansion was underpinned through “reciprocal interaction not only with other forms of animal production but with economic forms of nonpastoral neighbours”.⁴¹ Given fluctuating environmental conditions a range of adaptive subsistence options were often essential, as too were affiliate and/or relations of conflict with neighbouring and proximal communities. Moreover, the safety and network potential established with peripheral individuals by bond obligations and debts, principally but not exclusively of livestock, should not be underestimated.⁴² The material evidence of intercultural contact may be observed in varying ways. Karega-Munene has argued that traditional approaches to ceramic wares and associated notions of discrete bounded ethnicities underplay the vibrancy of contact and exchange between various prehistoric pastoral groups from Eastern Africa.⁴³ Instead, he argues that material culture should be understood to reflect the dynamic relationships that existed between those responsible for their production and consumption. As Bower has acknowledged, it is therefore important to note that past migratory movements would have been “at least as strongly influenced by relations with neighbouring groups as by ecological considerations”.⁴⁴ Clearly this is something often overlooked in reductive accounts of ethnic movements governed by pulses of desiccation and/or the opening-up of grassland corridors,⁴⁵ and it warrants serious consideration in studies of past Omo Valley groups in particular.



Figure 8. Ring of standing stones from the Lokeri stone pillar site (Namora'tunga II), Lake Turkana, Northern Kenya (photo: Matt Davies).

One striking example is from a megalithic cairn and pillar site at Jarigole on the west side of Lake Turkana, probably dating to the Pastoral Neolithic (Figure 9).⁴⁶ Excavations uncovered ornamental snail shell beads (*Strigatella paupercula*) imported from the Indian Ocean coast, at a distance of at least 840 km (Figure 10). However, as Nelson, demonstrates, other more local items of trade or portage are also observed at Jarigole; for example, beads and pendants of amazonite and carnelian had been transported over a distance of at least 150–300 km, pottery with quartz temper made at a distance of 80–120 km, and obsidian artefacts likely derived from sources 60–80 km away.⁴⁷ Indeed, Pastoral Neolithic obsidian transportation has been similarly documented between Naivasha Basin in the Central Rift Valley to Mount Kilimanjaro to the south,⁴⁸ Kilungu to the east,⁴⁹ and Lake Victoria to the west.⁵⁰ Again these distances of between 140 and 250 km highlight that established trading networks were operating prior to the advent of the coastal trading ports. However, the frequency of such occurrences of externally procured items generally diminishes as the distance between source and destination increases. On the basis of what is a relatively low frequency of exotic material present at the Jarigole site, for example, it seems most likely that a “trickle-in” model of exchange, absent of professional traders in the interior hinterland, is responsible. This mechanism would, nonetheless, be sufficient to explain many widespread ceremonial and symbolic resonances throughout and beyond the Horn. In this regard it is crucial to note that, once established, pastoral exchange networks endured.



Figure 9. Standing and fallen pillars from the Jarigole stone pillar site, Lake Turkana, Northern Kenya (photo: Charles Nelson).

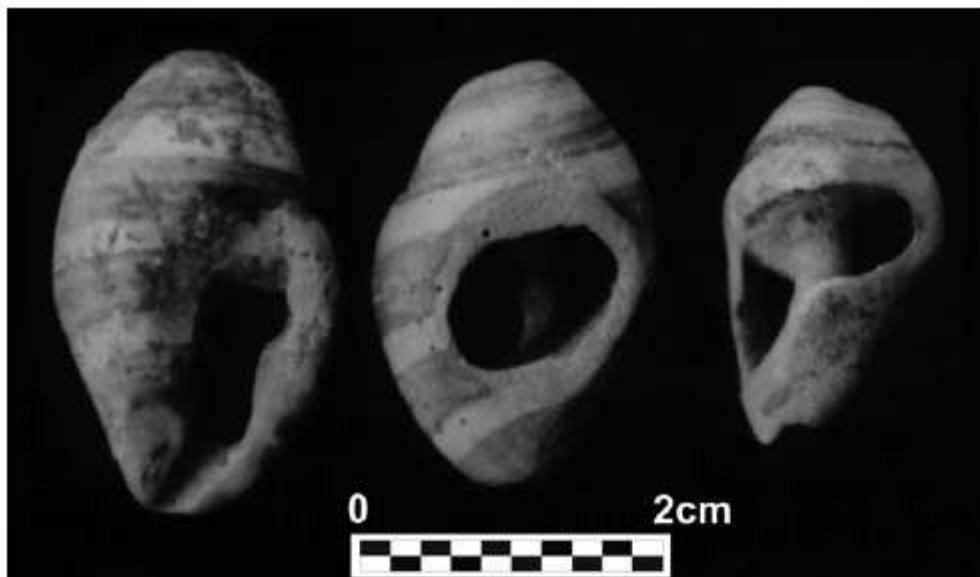


Figure 10. Ornamental beads made from snail shell (*Strigatella paupercula*) found at Jarigole and imported from the Indian Ocean coast (photo: Charles Nelson).

These regional issues are important and have considerable ramifications for the study of past and present pastoral identities and their place-making practices and performances. However, they must also be situated within a global framework relating the collection and interpretation of archaeological data to multiple systems of knowledge.

Global place-making

(i) Implementing a participative archaeology

In both archaeology and anthropology there has been a call for the re-examination of ethical frameworks and recognition of a pressing need to extend obligations and commitments towards a multitude of stakeholders through responsible practice.⁵¹ This concern derives in part from the political philosophy of cosmopolitanism, and demands that archaeology rethinks the scope of its engagements. Under these terms archaeology encounters a multitude of complex issues, making the legitimization of

objectives and appropriate responses distinctly context-specific.⁵² The degree to which archaeologists are presently equipped to engage with these issues “in the field” remains arguable, and in spite of growing necessity for scholars to justify research agendas on the basis of “impact”, the position of funding agencies on non-academic, but equally legitimate, impact requirements “on the ground”, such as the sustainability of humanitarian needs, oftentimes remains unclear. Moreover, recognition of potential negative and unintended consequences resulting from well-meaning actions is an essential but perhaps under-developed component of this unfolding awareness.⁵³ Nonetheless, as introduced in this final section, for those motivated to pursue such agendas it is clear that there are further obligations of engaged responsibility. The ongoing research at Dirikoro endeavours to take the issues of engaged responsibility into account through what may be termed a participative archaeology. This is taken to be foundational to the research practice at Dirikoro, from project design, through to field practice, and into and beyond dissemination. The ethical foundation for such a framework is from the tradition of participatory-led research that serves to dissolve the tension between scholarship and service.⁵⁴ This acknowledges that there lies an expectation of reciprocity within the subjects under study that is often overlooked or unfulfilled, and calls instead for an equal process of exchange between researchers and communities.

The aims of a participative archaeology may be placed alongside the broader context of public archaeology and community-led practice that identifies with heritage as “a cultural process or performance of meaning-making”⁵⁵. This acknowledges, therefore, that involvement of local representatives in heritage-focused research is an integral component in the unfolding of value, custodianship, and articulation of the meaning of heritage to the definition of a community. African archaeology has been criticised for overlooking this element in much of its research.⁵⁶ Participative approaches in archaeology are not adopted simply as a requirement based upon ethical principles, but may also be considered beneficial to achieving interpretative ambitions. Indeed, participative archaeologies engage in contact zones not only between communities, but also between forms of knowledge, or different expert systems called upon for understanding the world. Specifically, these may be distinguished as indigenous or traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge⁵⁷ that work under very different notions of time, including the relationship of the past to the present.⁵⁸ Indeed, taking into account multiple forms of knowledge is crucial to understanding the stakes at issue in the processes of place-making. The challenge, therefore, that has been set for research at Dirikoro, is to identify and build upon the common ground at which indigenous and scientific knowledge cohabit.

(ii) Community and participation

Heritage, broadly defined, is embedded within the geo-politics of ethnic and national identity.⁵⁹ The characterisation of the Lower Omo Valley as a “natural landscape” or “unspoilt wilderness”, devoid of human activity, past and present, allows for a discourse in which a borderland population may be presented as a recent encroachment on and compromise of an otherwise “pristine” environment. Whilst this is clearly an inaccurate representation, its effect has in recent years had very real consequences for the locale with the power to influence attitudes and policies at multiple levels. Largely motivated by political and economic processes, the “finding” of the Lower Omo Valley by various agencies has started to exert a succession of influences, many of which may, in both the short and long term, remain unforeseen, but are likely to influence regional cultural and ecological diversity. This has diluted the protection previously afforded by the difficulties of asserting administrative control in a “remote” region. Most of these influences fall under the rubric of development, and include conservation (concessions and parks), bio-extraction (cotton), and renewable energy (bio-fuels and hydro-electricity). Importantly, archaeology does not stand apart from these issues, and what is common to each of them is the risk of failure in taking into account the views, interests and knowledge of inhabitant people. Archaeological survey of past inhabitation may therefore offer an additional buttress for contemporary identities, whilst contributing to debate concerning impacts of rangeland communities on local environments. Moreover, study into the temporal perspective of Mursi place-making offers enhancement, albeit of an admittedly limited form, of local communities’ empowerment towards the cultural impact of seemingly inevitable change from outside (and largely unfamiliar or unknown) forces. As a part of this process the communication of archaeological findings beyond academe is essential, necessitating a priority of local involvement in decisions regarding the character and context of dissemination.

It would be invidious to assume that an archaeological encounter with heritage, even that of a global proportion, could take precedence over more immediate human concerns. The value of archaeological

practice and research to local communities in Mursiland emerges through a two-way dialogue between researcher and community. This is reliant upon the construction of mutual trust. It is essential therefore, when drawing from the local archaeological resource, to reciprocate in an appropriate manner. As such, and where appropriate, the fieldwork is sensitive to local concerns. For example, the first season of fieldwork was conducted during an ongoing and debilitating drought; living and working in the same conditions of water scarcity therefore precipitated the modification of personal and archaeological practice. For instance, as much as it was inappropriate to conspicuously consume vast quantities of bottled water (which itself is regarded as a healing substance), it was similarly inappropriate to actively “wet” excavated layers to enhance the visibility of features. Instead, a tarpaulin system to capture condensation had to be devised and integrated into the field schedule. Only through dialogue and negotiation can common ground be found regarding stake-holder expectations. Therefore, requests for aid in the construction of a resource for sustainable access to a water supply in times of difficulty are being taken seriously, and the viability of (non-academic) funding for such a venture is being actively sought. Ultimately the goal is mutual trust and a relationship that distinguishes the researcher from less desirable interlopers into Mursi territory.

(iii) Participative archaeologies and place-making

We would further contend that participative archaeologies are involved in the negotiated properties of place-making. Ultimately the presence of archaeologists and the performances of archaeological endeavours and community participation in those processes, reconfigure places (Figure 11). Places can be made and unmade; they can be object, subject, representation and experience, and the inherent meanings within each conception frequently merge and overlap.⁶⁰ People cope with places, as they do with the entire environment, by engaging with history and memory. Traditions of the past congeal around localities. This is why it is sometimes noted that the sense of cultural heritage derives from memory being collapsed into place.⁶¹ Archaeological interventions partake in place-making to some degree. At Dirikoro both the researcher and his or her research are the object of community dialogue aiming at cultural intelligibility of their actions. Likewise, the archaeology itself, and the interest invested into it by an outside agency, is evolving the emotive association of place within Dirikoro. It is hoped that through a participatory archaeology such processes can be critically scrutinised.

Finally, whilst the politics of place are reconfigured by a participatory archaeology at the local level, so too is the geography of Mursi identity widened as fieldwork increasingly forges international connections, at times in preference over those more distinctly national and local. The cosmopolitan ramifications of this have yet to be fully considered despite the pioneering involvements of academics in the development of such relations. As Lynn Meskell has rightly noted, there is need for “a more nuanced analytical reach than the traditional bifurcations of global and local”,⁶² and this has very real consequences for the way archaeology is practised and the types of knowledge that are produced.



Figure 11. A Mursi warrior deliberates a Benna kulugto platform recently cleared of vegetation (photo: Alberto Arzoz).

Conclusions

This paper has explored some of the theoretical and methodological challenges involved in interpreting monumental places in the Horn of Africa with particular reference to the Lower Omo Valley. Place-making has been considered as a result of archaeological intervention in the Mursi landscape, with an awareness of the socio-political implications of this connection. Places are always “in-the-making” and related, experienced, re-interpreted, and re-produced in every encounter. Thus, the re-articulation of Dirikoro during our recent fieldwork as a place resonant with new meanings, is part of an on-going negotiation that is potentially fractious. Archaeological engagement here has raised new concerns for local communities. Places correspond to experiential space through networks of disclosure and directionality.⁶³ Disclosure is the process whereby things are recognised as distinct entities in order to facilitate their relational emplacement. Moreover, directionality is characterised by one’s emotional and cultural involvement: it is through inhabitation and dwelling that places are repeatedly inscribed with innate forms of familiarity and intimacy. The archaeological fieldwork at Dirikoro has, for some, changed the characterisation of place through alterations to associated meanings. This is not to say that Mursi interpretation is in alignment with those of the archaeologists, but rather that the attention afforded to place has resulted in a culturally mediated re-evaluation of the past linked to the encoding of memories, values and symbols. Thus although we may have continuity of cultural significance through time the meanings associated and underpinning this significance can and does change.

Place and memory bring communities into alignment. Furthermore, places have ideological and ontological implications for the way in which the world is interpreted. It is in this context that we should recall that the past is always in and of the present. The past, through residual networks of meaning structures, informs identity inscription. This is why the material residues of the past time and again feature in the lived, and very often the spiritual, experience of modern inhabitant communities. In this sense certain places have what might be called “residual afterlives”. Through archaeology we serve to rearticulate and reinvigorate the identities and characteristics of these afterlives. Such insights compel us to adopt participatory strategies in the field.

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Notes

1. Bower, “The Pastoral Neolithic of East Africa,” 62.
2. Phillipson, *African Archaeology*, 173.
3. Pinter, *The Homecoming*.
4. Clack and Brittain, “The ‘Ella’ Stone Platforms of Mursiland”; Clack and Brittain, “Excavations and Surveys in Mursiland.”
5. See for example Bender, *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*; Bender, *Stonehenge: Making Space*; Feld and Bassi, *Senses of Place*; Hirsch and O’Hanlon, *The Anthropology of Landscape*; Knapp and Ashmore, *Archaeologies of Landscape*; Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*; Ucko and Layton, *The Archaeology and Anthropology of Landscape*.
6. Thomas, “Archaeologies of Place and Landscape,” 172.
7. Ingold, *Lines*.
8. Bassi, *Wisdom Sits in Places*.
9. Turton, “The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement,” 267.
10. Gowlett, “Archaeological Studies of Human Origins,” 32_3.
11. See for examples Asfaw et al., “Fejej”; Fleagle et al., “New Hominid Fossils from Fejej”; McDougall, Brown and Fleagle, “Stratigraphic Placement and Age.”
12. See for example Brown, “Barbed Bone Points from the Lower Omo Valley.”
13. Turton, “A Journey Made Them.”
14. See Lamb et al., “Oxygen and Carbon Isotope Composition of Authigenic Carbonate”; Verschuren, Laird and Cumming, “Rainfall and Drought in Equatorial East Africa”; Gil-Romera et al., “Long-Term Resilience.”
15. Clack and Brittain, “The ‘Ella’ Stone Platforms of Mursiland”; Clack and Brittain, “Excavations and Surveys in Mursiland.”

16. Turton, "The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement," 272.
17. Marta Lahr, pers. comm.
18. See Anfray, "Les Steles du Sud Shoa et Sidamo"; Bekele, "Notes on the Megalithic Sites of Southern Ethiopia"; Joussaume, Le Me'galithisme en E' thiopie; Joussaume, Tiya: L'E' thiopie des Me'galithes; Joussaume, Tuto Fela et les Ste'les du Sud de l'E' thiopie; Megenassa, "An Inventory of Megalithic Sites in Gurage Highlands."
19. Fattovich, "Some Remarks on the Origins of the Aksumite Stelae," 43_69.
20. Chittick, "Somalia."
21. Joussaume, Tuto Fela et les Ste'les du Sud de l'E' thiopie, 14.
22. Robbins, "Lake Turkana Archaeology: The Holocene."
23. Evans-Pritchard, "Megalithic Grave Monuments in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Other Parts of East Africa."
24. Hallpike, The Konso of Ethiopia; Henze, "Arsi Oromo Tomb Art."
25. Holtorf, "The Life-history of Megaliths in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Germany)."
26. Insoll, "Shrine Franchising and the Neolithic in the British Isles," 234_5.
27. Brittain, "Layers of Life and Death."
28. Thomas, "Archaeology, Landscape, and Dwelling."
29. Turton, "The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement," 265.
30. Ibid., 266.
31. Ibid., 269.
32. Smith, "Origins and Spread of Pastoralism in Africa," 132.
33. Lynch, "The Namoratunga Cemetery and Rock Art Sites of Northwest Kenya"; Lynch and Robbins, "Animal Brands and the Interpretation of Rock Art in East Africa"; Robbins, "Lake Turkana Archaeology."
34. Butzer, Recent History of an Ethiopian Delta.
35. Robbins, "Lake Turkana Archaeology."
36. See for example Lynch and Robbins, "Animal Brands and the Interpretation of Rock Art"; for critique see Soper, "Archaeo-Astronomical Cushites"; Doyle, and Wilcox, "Statistical Analysis of Namoratunga."
37. For example: Lonsdale, "The Moral Economy of the Mau Mau," 266.
38. Stiles, "Preliminary Results of Archaeological and Paleoenvironmental Research in Northern Kenya."
39. Bower, "Early Food Production in Africa," 131.
40. Hodder, Symbols in Action.
41. Galaty, "Pastoral Orbits and Deadly Jousts," 172.
42. Evans-Pritchard, The Nuer.
43. Karega-Munene, "The East African Neolithic."
44. Bower, "The Pastoral Neolithic of East Africa," 61.
45. Bower, "The Pastoral Neolithic of East Africa"; Smith, "Origins and Spread of Pastoralism in Africa"; Smith, "Environmental Limitations on Prehistoric Pastoralism in Africa"; Williams, "After the Deluge."
46. Nelson, "The Work of the Koobi Fora Field School at the Jarigole Pillar Site."
47. Nelson, "Evidence for Early Trade between the Coast and Interior of East Africa."
48. Mturi, "The Pastoral Neolithic of West Kilimanjaro."
49. Merrick and Brown, "Obsidian Sources and Patterns of Source Utilization."
50. Robertshaw, The Early Pastoralists of Southwestern Kenya.
51. Kahn, "Anthropology as Cosmopolitan Practice"; Lane, "Rethinking Ethnoarchaeology"; Meskell, Cosmopolitan Archaeologies; Mire, "Preserving Knowledge, Not Objects."; Wylie, "The Promise and Perils of an Ethics of Stewardship."
52. Hall, "Situated Ethics and Engaged Practice."
53. Fuller, "The Critique of Intellectuals in a Time of Pragmatist Captivity."
54. Petras and Porpora, "Participatory Research."
55. Smith and Waterton, Heritage, Communities and Archaeology, 44.
56. Mapunda and Lane, "Archaeology for Whose Interest—Archaeologists or the Locals?"
57. Marliac, "Scientific Discourses and Local Discourses."
58. Tornay, "Arche'ologie, Ethno-histoire, Ethnographie."
59. Anderson, Imagined Communities; Hobsbawm and Ranger, The Invention of Tradition; Jones, The Archaeology of Ethnicity; Smith, Archaeological Theory and the Politics of Cultural Heritage.
60. Lemaire, "Archaeology between the Invention and Destruction of Landscape."
61. Clack, Memory and the Mountain.
62. Meskell, Cosmopolitan Archaeologies, 17.
63. Thomas, Time, Culture and Identity, 83.

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