

## THE MAGIC OF THINGS: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON MATERIAL EXCHANGE IN A SOUTH-WESTERN ETHIOPIAN TOURIST AREA

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines how members of the Mursi, a south Ethiopian agro-pastoral community, experience strange and alien materials and how such experiences help them to reflect on their own identity and personhood. I describe not only the “social life” of these alien objects but also discuss the meanings of these material substances in terms of local identity. As the social values of the objects were not constructed in the immediate frame of the exchange, such meanings developed and had to be monitored over time. I followed the circulation of these materials within and across groups and considered how they became personally and socially meaningful.

**Key Words:** Anthropology; Materiality; Magic; East Africa; Pastoralism; Mursi people.

### INTRODUCTION

This article examines how members of the Mursi, a south Ethiopian agro-pastoral community, experience strange and alien materials and how such experiences help them to reflect on their identity and personhood. My ethnographic research was conducted in the Lower Omo Valley in southwestern Ethiopia, where I have worked<sup>(1)</sup> with the Mursi, a small agro-pastoral community, in 1999, 2008–2009, and 2014. The events I describe were not my main interest,<sup>(2)</sup> but they gradually captured my attention. As I was observing and documenting the different ethnic practices of the Mursi related to *haranchinya* and *touristinya*,<sup>(3)</sup> I started to notice how Western visitors gave them not only cash but also clothes, empty plastic bottles, razors, plastic beads, soap, balloons, sunglasses, soap-bubble blowers, rubber masks, pencils, photographs, and toys. After the visitors had left, these objects remained in the settlement in which I lived. At first, these objects did not seem to offer an opportunity for a comprehensive anthropological interpretation, but I eventually accumulated an increasing number of items on a list of “things left by tourists”, and it became difficult to ignore them. First, my attention was increasingly drawn to these objects as people regularly asked me to explain how to use them. The different materials were regarded as pieces of the white man’s culture, and the Mursi always tried to fix them when they broke. If they failed, I was called upon to help. Some people walked miles to ask me to repair zippers, fix walkie-talkies, or to repair torn banknotes with tape. While I was repairing these objects, we talked about them, and I eventually became fascinated by how these objects led people to think about their visitors and, through them, about their own identity.

As the social value of these objects was not constructed within the immediate frame of the exchange (Thomas, 1991), such meanings developed and had to be monitored over time. I followed the circulation of the objects and observed how they became personally and socially meaningful. Among the local residents, the uniqueness of some of the materials left by tourists was negated when they saw the mass-produced goods in the neighboring markets that people visited frequently. The social landscape of the Mursi was thus often “invaded” by the diverse transcendental capacities of alien objects.

## THE TECHNOLOGY OF SELFHOOD

Objects and materials are inevitably involved in ethnographic encounters, and anthropological accounts have always addressed how people relate to (shape or control) their material environment. The interpretation of the spirit of the gift developed by Marcel Mauss (1966) was one of the first to collapse selfhood and materiality into one major concept. The gift economy, unlike the commodity economy, involves both the spirit of the material and the spirit of the individual. This spirit extends human agency and enables flexibility in individual identity, imagination, and creativity. Following Mauss, many anthropologists have connected concepts of things and selfhood and discussed the different ways by which people and materials enter into myriad relationships.

For example, according to Alfred Gell (1988), the way in which people engage with their environment is best described using the concept of technology. Technology is not only a tool-using activity; we can also speak of the technology of reproduction (e.g., kinship) or the technology of “enchancements” (e.g., gift exchanges). Indeed, it is magic that gives form to these technologies. Magical thoughts impose an organizing framework that regulates technologies. Unlike technology (which exploits the properties of things), magic refers to the symbolic ends of tool use, kinship, economic processes, and so on. Magic is a symbolic commentary on the technical strategies of production, reproduction, or psychological manipulation as it sets an ideal standard toward which practical technical actions can be oriented. The technological changes resulting from innovation and creativity are attributable to the cognitive role of magical ideas, which provide the orienting framework for technical activities rather than material needs (Gell, 1988).

Gell provides several ethnographic examples (fishing techniques from the Solomon Islands or salt making from Papua New Guinea) that may not seem magical to us but that are for the practitioners. His discussion of how magic maintains the different technologies that people apply to control and change their environment is a useful way to frame my argument about alien objects among the Mursi. Gell’s concept of magic accommodates the different technologies used by the Mursi in relation to their newly acquired objects and enhances our discussion of magic by framing it not only in terms of agency (Appadurai, 1986) but also in the form of a cognitive structure.

In this article, I discuss the technology and magic of (mostly white) strangers’

materials among the Mursi. This topic has often been addressed by studies of magic in colonial encounters, but it has only rarely appeared in research in post-modern settings.<sup>(4)</sup> However, I do not concentrate on magic in the sense of the Melanesian cargo cult or of altered states of consciousness, such as trance and possession (Winkelman, 1982), or of a certain belief system (Willis, 1996). Nor do I focus on the notion of a strong magical consciousness, which Greenwood (2009) defined as an expanded aspect of awareness. Instead, my understanding of magic is governed by the question of how people try to eliminate uncertainty in their everyday lives. Viewed in this way, magic is both a means to establish certainty through the use of various technologies as well a means by which people come to see themselves as in some way constituted by their relationship with material objects.

The display of foreign objects (in the form of clothes, everyday materials, decorations, etc.) not only provides material metaphors for self-identity but also allows people to transform the Other (tourists and other visitors) into something familiar. In this sense, what I describe here was not only an appropriation of strange materials into a new social context but also a domestication of the Other through material objects. For example, a tourist's gift of a bubble blower became a tobacco container, and colorful balloons, once they had burst, were used to keep money. These technical strategies, or technical domestication processes, were accompanied by symbolic commentaries (naming, ornamenting), which also shaped the cognitive categorizations expressed in language, fashion, and ornaments.

## MAGICAL OBJECTS IN COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA

Tourism, which establishes a unique relationship between things and people, has become a powerful mode of human contact during the late modern era. However, the events that I witnessed in present-day Ethiopia have a long history on the continent. Indeed, there is an odd continuity between Victorian "explorers" and contemporary tourists in terms of how the latter participate in a "sideshow" during their encounters with African societies. Appealing to local curiosity with impressive objects has been a practice among white travelers since the turn of the twentieth century (Fabian, 2000). Objects that shocked, scared, or impressed the local people were always part of travelers' baggage, as these objects often helped them control situations in which verbal communication was difficult or impossible. A German traveling in the 1870s, Paul Pogge, was once surrounded by natives in a village on his trip to Lunda; people watched him with awe, "until I dropped the curtain in the form of a door made of straw, whereupon the audience went away, one after the other, somewhat as in Europe after a theatrical performance" (Pogge, 1880: 66, quoted in Fabian, 2000: 105). The first European-African encounters often resembled a theatrical event. However, these acts were arranged for the Africans and not for the Europeans. White men "staged exhibits of European objects" (Fabian, 2000: 106) much earlier than Africans did for their visitors (Régi, 2013a).

Postmodern African ritual performances for tourists are therefore based on a

European theatrical tradition (Bruner & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994; Régi 2013b). The early occidental form of dealing with African curiosity informed the subsequent tourism industry. In a literal sense, local–tourist encounters often occur in theatrical settings; that is, objects of curiosity are placed on a stage and witnessed by a local audience. This context is important for locals when they set up their “theater” for tourists, as they mimic the earlier European theaters (Régi, 2009). However, irrespective of whoever mimics the other, “strange” materials have always been a core part of what travelers bring, and they still try to impress the local people with their curious materials (Régi, 2007).

This form of theatrical encounter between tourists and Africans can now be observed in the lower Omo Valley. Most of the objects that tourists bring to Mursiland are not used in their normal contexts but are used in an extemporaneous theatrical setting to generate wonder among the locals. Mursiland, bordered by the Omo and the Mago Rivers, was more or less protected from international tourists until the 1990s, when the government established security and infrastructure in the area, which were necessary for the development of mass tourism. International tourists, mostly on package tours, started to flow to the lower Omo region, which was seen as the “Tribal South”, in contrast to the “Historical North” circuit in Ethiopia. By the early 2000s, increasing numbers Mursi realized the economic benefits of being photographed by tourists and had established temporary settlements along the only road appropriate for motorized vehicles that crosses northern Mursiland. Tourists pay for every photograph they take and each car that enters the villages. They spend an average of 45 minutes in a village, walking around and taking photographs, mostly of women with large lip plates, before returning to the neighboring town, Jinka. Increasing numbers of Mursi people try to exploit this opportunity as a source of extra income, although their main economic activity is still based on cattle pastoralism and the cultivation of sorghum.

For the Mursi, tourists represent a poorly understood but significant economic resource that was previously out of reach. Southern Ethiopia is on the political periphery, with limited access to the world economy, and the materials that flow into this space are also peripheral. There is always a central political (the Ethiopian government) or economic (the Western tourism industry) power that limits the commodities that can enter this area. However, long before these forces began to control this region, two important commodities from the outside world were highly significant to the Mursi: rifles and glass beads. David Turton, the first anthropologist to have worked among the Mursi and who first visited them in 1969, has written about how the Mursi think about these materials:

What the Mursi wanted to know from me was how necklace beads and firearms were produced. It was clear, from the way they phrased their questions, that they already had their own theories about this. In what kind of tree, they asked, did glass beads grow? And was it true that rifles—clearly a technological rather than a natural product—were made by smiths who lived and worked under water? New knowledge and information is, of course, always absorbed and accounted for in ways that are least disturbing to our existing cognitive and cultural assumptions. These Mursi theories

about glass beads and rifles had the advantage of leaving intact their view of themselves as occupying a central place in the world. They were the equivalent of the strategy of avoidance and denial adopted towards the Ethiopian state. For neither necklace beads nor rifles were imagined to be products of a recognizably human process of technological production, located in another “neighborhood” that was “context-generative” in relation to the neighborhood they occupied. Necklace beads were seen as products of nature—it was just that the trees in question did not grow in their country. Rifles, on the other hand, were seen as supernatural products, made in a place that was simply not inhabitable by “normal” human beings. (Turton, 2004: 19).

Rifles<sup>(5)</sup> are the only alien object that the Mursi have incorporated into their bride-wealth system, which is the most important component of their domestic economy and everyday culture. A man who gives approximately 25 cattle to his bride’s family can also include one or more rifles in the payment. The rifle, which has now lost its supernatural status, is an important part of the everyday attire of most Mursi men and part of a man’s identity. During the past two decades, an increasing number of rifles and, with them, other alien objects have flowed into this area from different parts of Ethiopia and Sudan. The contact zone, which early travelers established as a space of domination, is now filled with exchange materials brought in by Western and highland traders. The theaters of the outside world (highland village market stands and tourist villages) offer new and unknown objects, and the Mursi want even more of these objects. Thus, the Mursi’s social landscape at the turn of the millennium was molded into and surrounded by the materiality of an alien culture.

#### THE MAGIC OF CASH: FROM A PIECE OF PAPER TO A MEDIUM OF EXCHANGE

The key alien material in Mursi–tourist encounters is cash. However, when the Mursi first encountered banknotes in great numbers, in the 1970s and 1980s, they valued the quantity of the notes rather than their value as money. For example, three 1 birr (ETB) notes were often seen as more valuable than one 10 birr note. Tour operators advise their customers to bring as many new 1 birr notes as they can because the people often reject worn and damaged notes. One reason for this may be that *kuchumba*<sup>(6)</sup> traders often accept only new banknotes so people prefer receiving undamaged notes for trading. On several occasions, I witnessed people demanding new, clean notes from tourists.

As soon as they had collected a number of notes, a new problem emerged: how to store them safely. The Mursi approach to the storage of banknotes is fascinating. Some people folded up a large number of notes and wrapped them into one small square, which they put in one of the corners of their blanket cloth or in their backpack, which they then hid them in their hut. Some people made rolls of notes, binding them with tiny pieces of string and hiding the rolls in their

bag. People often tried to determine where their friends or family members hid their cache.

Most people were afraid that their banknotes, especially the 50 and 100 birr notes, would split or that a piece might tear off. When this occurred, they asked one another or the tourists to exchange the damaged banknote for a pristine one. When some Mursi discovered that I had Sellotape (which I used for wrapping objects in paper), there was a continuous demand for me to use this to repair torn banknotes. People even walked from distant neighboring villages to ask me to repair their banknotes.

People believed that all white people created their own money and that foreigners had no problem getting as much money as they wanted. The Mursi strongly believed that money was endlessly available to foreigners in their home country. As a young Mursi woman explained (in answer to my question “Why do the Mursi believe that the *haranchi* have lots of money?”), “We just think that the *haranchi* is the one who is making the money.”

They found it hard to accept the idea that money was a limited commodity for white people. This belief derived from daily empirical observations of their white visitors, especially tourists, continuously pulling out crisp banknotes from their pockets and paying for photographs or purchasing lip plates or other things they wanted. This certainly impressed many Mursi and made them think about their own situation, as is clear from the following exchange:

TR: Why do the Mursi think that the *haranchinya* have lots of money?

SO: Because the *haranchinya* just bring stuff like drinking containers and lots of pots; and they have lots of money to buy things. And the Mursi can see this. They think the *haranchinya* have lots of money, and they are not worried about anything...

Teenage Mursi boys often explained to me, “[T]he white man’s pocket is always full of money.” The notion that wealth is derived from pieces of paper and not from cattle is still an odd concept to many Mursi, but some of them have started to identify affluence with cash. This wealth, and the new kind of identity it entails, originated with strangers. However, the historical trajectory of cash, which started as mere material and ended up as a new form of power, remains incomplete. Moreover, this trajectory can be seen as the result of state influence on the daily lives of the Mursi.

## THE MAGIC OF TRASH: LITTERING TOURISTS AND RUBBISH FROM THE TOWN

At the beginning of my fieldwork, most of the objects I observed lacked an everyday use or an exchange value that would render their materiality obvious. Some of the tourists believed that the Mursi would be pleased to have items such as balloons or soap-bubble blowers, even though they had no idea what to do





**Fig. 1.** A Mursi school bag made from unused truck tires  
Photographed by the author in 2008.



**Fig. 2.** A Mursi elder has a toothbrush fastened to his Kalashnikov belt  
Photographed by the author in 2008.

with these things until the tourists, myself, or one of the tour guides explained their function. In the villages, the air sometimes sparkled from the soap bubbles that squealing children chased tirelessly. The scene was magical until the soap bubbles and balloons burst, and the awe quickly ended. The magic was fluid in every sense.

Later, these soap-bubble blowers were transformed into tobacco containers or cut up into pieces and used for decorations. These things, which the tourists used to create local curiosity, ended up as part of a unique circulating system across the Mursi social landscape, often travelling miles from their first Mursi owners to another part of Mursiland. Clothes, empty plastic bottles, plastic beads, razor blades, soap, sunglasses, rubber masks, pencils and pens, paper, photographs, and toys were left by tourists on an almost daily basis. Unlike the soap-bubble blowers, some of these materials were used according to their original purpose. Razor blades were used for shaving, plastic bottles for carrying water on long-distance walks, and soap for daily washing.

Some alien objects that came to the Mursi during my fieldwork were not explained to them. Tourists, Ethiopian road-construction workers, and NGO workers often left damaged car parts or similar items. Figure 1 shows a school bag made from unused truck tires. Children were often among the most creative inventors, but the older generation also incorporated many alien materials into their daily lives. In Figure 2, an elder has a toothbrush fastened to his Kalashnikov belt. Weapon belts were often made from plastic trouser belts, and toothbrushes were used for cleaning the weapons. Then, if the toothbrush broke, its handle was used for decoration. Worn and damaged plastic and rubber slippers were cut into pieces, tied together and used for earrings, bracelets, and other jewelry. Con-



**Fig. 3.** A young Mursi man with a suitcase in his hut  
Photographed by the author in 2008.

tainers for tobacco and other small items took on new and diverse forms (e.g., old glass medicine containers, empty plastic candy containers, pieces of nylon bags, etc.). I was continually fascinated by how people repaired damaged zippers, torn handbags, broken sunglasses, and other everyday items. They even successfully repaired broken plastic bottles by sewing the pieces together. They responded to objects that seemed to be trash with great skill and imagination. Almost no materials or tools went to waste; they simply changed their shape or became smaller.

Figure 3 shows a young Mursi man with a suitcase in his hut. This suitcase contained his important personal items, such as medicine bottles, clothes, photographs, and newspapers. Everyone had a nylon bag, a pack, or at least a small plastic container in which they kept not only cash but also their valuables, which were usually hidden. These were small medicine containers, needles, candy wrappers, banknotes, photographs, tobacco, beads, mirror pieces, and metal bracelets. Collecting objects and memorabilia was part of most Mursi people's lives and can be regarded a creative objectification of the self.

These containers or magical "toolboxes" act as "tool-beings", Heideggerian objects that provide a context in which people relate to the world (Harman, 2002). The meaning of waste lost its strong normative connotation and was endowed with a new substantive identity. Things were transformed and given a new meaning, a new function, a new form and, at times, a new identity through an invented physical shape. Materials were no longer commodities or products but became part—other objects and part of another self. Thus, alien materials are incorporated into Mursi objects and lose their previous identities. The boundaries of things are often blurred. Just as the limit of the substances is unclear, the frame of agency (if there is any) is uncertain. Through the applied technologies, the magic of the materials moves from one object to another or disappears completely. The creative technologies surrounding these alien materials are aimed at controlling substances, constantly enlivening and renewing them, and attempts restore their original forms are rare.

This process of material interchange involves semiotic and linguistic incorporation. The new objects that the Mursi cannot use according to their "original" purpose start to be incorporated into the old material culture. "Something new



can stand as a subtype, a special form of something which is already known” (Thomas, 1991: 105). Thus, the soap-bubble blower becomes a tobacco container and the balloons, after they burst, are used to keep money. A terminological attachment also occurs as the Mursi call these items *hōloi* (the name for a tobacco container). However, this conceptual extension does not work in the same way in each case. Plastic bead necklaces and bracelets given by tourists to Mursi children are not always held in very high esteem because the Mursi are strict about the color and size of the beads they use. Therefore, jewelry that differs too much from that used by the Mursi is given to children for play.

The magic of alien materials lies not only in the associated cultural value of the actual objects (as with cash) but also in the substances of materiality. The magic of materiality is not a fixed value because the material nature of objects, where its spirit often resides, is rarely derived from men, and the conceptualization of objects is often momentary. Objects are not what they are made to be but what they have to become (Thomas, 1991). The way that most Mursi treat objects from tourists and other strangers is dynamic, and this creative dynamism results in a fluid material identity. This fluidity is not only the creative Mursi reflection of scarcity but also a sign of the changing world. These collections of objects not only seemed like trash to Western eyes but were often, literally, the waste that tourists or other travelers deposited from their cars during their journeys or items that the Mursi found in the streets in Jinka. This political economy of trash demonstrates the often untold side of material globalization and how some Mursi cannot act as consumers in the expanding market economy. Moreover, this politics of rubbish clearly symbolizes how societies’ borders intersect with one another. For a better understanding of the ramifications of this cultural reaction to globalized rubbish, we must also examine how the Mursi recognize other alien materials obtained via globalized trade.

#### AGAINST CULTURAL HOMOGENIZATION: ALIEN OBJECTS FROM THE MARKET

The most widely used and appropriated non-Mursi materials are plastic jerry cans, metal dishes, and machetes. Because of the durability and usefulness of these objects, they are highly desirable. Most people relate to the outside world as the source of metal dishes, machetes, and plastic cans that they can buy at the market. Machetes are used for clearing grounds, for planting, or for cutting trees. The plastic or wooden handles of these tools are soon covered in calf or goat skin for protection. The Mursi men sharpen their machetes on special stones and, in time, the blade shortens and narrows until they attain the size of knives. Additionally, metal dishes are prized by Mursi wives as signs of their ability to feed the family. Mursi women constantly asked me for metal dishes and plastic cans. In addition to cash, these materials were what women most wanted from foreign lands. Indeed, most households possess at least one metal dish and several plastic cans.

Unlike the awe-inspiring things given to them by tourists, these objects were-



**Fig. 4.** Two jerry cans ornamented with *kichoga*, the basic Mursi ornamental patterns usually used in body decorations  
Photographed by the author in 2008.



**Fig. 5.** A decorated Mursi Kalashnikov butt  
Photographed by the author in 2009.

used according to their original functions, but they were often decorated. Figure 4 shows two jerry cans ornamented with *kichoga*, the basic Mursi ornamental patterns usually used in body decorations. When I asked a woman why she carved these patterns on a plastic dish, she explained, “Because if someone steals the plate, I can recognize it easily from my ornament.” These objects are good examples of the aesthetic incorporation of alien objects, but they also carry the “signature” of the owner, which is not only for purposes of adornment. Figure 5 presents an example of a decorated Kalashnikov butt. Mass-produced objects must be individualized, and ornamentation is regarded as the best way to do this. Duplicated jerry cans and metal dishes are integrated into an existing system of signs that renders them individualized and separate from the “masses”. In this sense, the conscious and unconscious Mursi treatment of alien materials opposes domination by a foreign esthetic that is often, supposedly, the basis of modernization and globalization.

Moreover, mass-produced alien materials are not seen as parts of a homogenized unit but are distinguished according to the general Mursi criteria for goods. For example, there is a broad consensus among the Mursi that *haranchinya* can produce fascinating materials but the *kuchumba* usually create useless things. Therefore, the Mursi appreciate the white man’s backpack more than they appreciate those available on the Ethiopian market. The people in the village with whom I spent most of my time were keen to scrutinize my equipment and clothes and to express their opinion about their quality.

However, one type of object was treated differently from the others. In the last couple of years, young Mursi men bought cheap quartz watches at the market in Jinka. These became so popular that most men felt they had to wear one. However, these watches did not work; their function changed, and the wristwatch came to stand for something other than the measurement of time. The people know the time of day at any given moment if they glance at the sky and check the position of the sun. Most Mursi cannot tell time in the Western sense of understanding how a watch or clock works. However, some people do know the meaning of hours after checking the sun. Teenage Mursi boys, usually wearing a wristwatch, often asked me for the time when they saw my watch. After I told

them the time, they looked up at the sun and walked away.

As the wristwatch is not used to measure time, what does it symbolize? Does it give its owner higher social esteem and, if so, why does an alien material object increase respect in the eyes of other locals? The watch is inevitably a unique alien object with a different material quality than any other alien object in the Mursi material landscape. This is an object that local people often see on the wrists of their visitors but never receive as gifts from them. It is one of the things strongly attached to the outside world, and it is difficult to obtain. Its semiotics cannot stand for an earlier sign in the Mursi culture; the wristwatch cannot replace any former Mursi idea of the material world, but it stands for a new one. Wearing and displaying these objects are “techniques in creating objects of attention” (Strathern, 2013), and it might seem contradictory to hide these things from the gaze of other Mursi. However, I see both as enactments of the same event: the making of the self through the collection and use of these objects.

One might say that wearing things such as wristwatches, especially if they do not work, is a mere practical irrationality, particularly in the environment inhabited by the Mursi. But, “if there is one expression more fit to invoke that presence than [Western] consumer commodities then surely it is the *image* of them” (Taussig, 1993: 134). The spirit of the wristwatch comes from the image it invokes through its material qualities. It is not only the likeness that gives it importance but also the contact between the magical material and the reality (Taussig, 1993). This view of magic, the connection among effectiveness, material contact, and representation, inevitably evokes the two Frazerian laws of magic: contact and similarity (Frazer, 2009 [1922]). The *contact*, as the base of the magical power of certain alien objects, is established in the tourist *contact* zone, the physical and conceptual space where the Mursi and their alien visitors encounter one another. Moreover, the Frazerian law of *similarity* is conceptualized as the locals gaze on the tourists and then try to use *similar* objects, copying and mimicking the alien. The power of the wristwatch derives from both the outer form (likeness) and the substances of the materiality. Most Mursi actually experience an ongoing tension between their everyday reality and the imaginations and dreams these new objects impose upon them. Many develop new technical solutions, innovations, and technical ideas to put an unknown object to use as a type of technology to transform the power of the Other into the identity of the self.

## CONCLUSION

I have discussed the Mursi cultural interpretation of alien objects to demonstrate how alien artefacts follow different trajectories in the daily lives of local people. In addition to the social and historical life of these alien materials, I have described the powerful nature of the material: the factors that carry meaning and invoke a certain form of magic for the local people. I argued earlier that an approach to the magic of alien materials should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the different (physical and cognitive) techniques people follow in their everyday lives when defining themselves through wealth, displays, and posses-

sions. On a broader level, I wanted to show the changing nature of materiality in an African economy. In the Mursi taxonomical system, the same material can carry different social meanings; in such cases, the distinctive identity of an object shifts its power from material substance to representation. These materials function as metonyms, perpetuating the materiality of the foreigners within the locale; they challenge local people to think about themselves through a technology of the Other. These objects are subsequently subjected to processes of resignification and reintegration that do not simply involve the incorporation of Western materiality. They are also an ontological reflection of alterity and, through this, a constant inevitable negotiation of selfhood.

Materials from tourists arrive at the scene of contact as gifts and not as required commodities; at the same time, mass-produced and manufactured objects from the outside world force the Mursi to enter the commodity economy, acquiring both cash and the objects. The cash, as mere material, acquires its current meaning through the evolving monetary system in the lower Omo and is now valued within Mursi society as probably the most important import from the outside world. The magic of certain objects has been eliminated with their history, and the awe has been transformed into covetousness. The cash economy of mass-produced materials has become one of the sources of political asymmetry between the Mursi and the Ethiopian state as increasing numbers of people are keen to own machetes, dishes, and plastic jerry cans, which they can obtain only in exchange for cash. The spirit of the gift has been attuned to the magic of the state (Taussig, 1997) and the magic of colonial curiosities has been replaced by the magic of commodities. The theatrical setting organized to amaze Africans was often merely an overture for the introduction of artefacts that local people gradually incorporated into their daily lives.

However, this does not mean that Mursi society is becoming a homogenized global group. For them, as Ferguson (2006) has shown for most Africans, Western goods are still unavailable in mass quantities, and trash is often picked up simply because resources are scarce. However, this situation also bestows power on the outside world as only it can provide certain materials. In this process, a localized, politically, and economically marginalized society attributes powerful qualities to materials that originate from outside. People try to eliminate uncertain political positions through the application of different technologies using alien objects. This process is what I described at the beginning as magical, something that is initially a technique to make life more certain in terms of one's individual identity and that then allows people to see themselves through certain things. Cutting, repairing, displaying, and hiding enable people not only to use and see things but also, through innovation, to incorporate them as a contribution to personhood.

These materials are often released by the dominance of market relationships (Pels, 1998), and tourism inevitably plays an enormous role in these economic links. For most Mursi, tourism, and all its material concomitants, is all they know of the modern monetary world economy, foreign politics, and borderless mobility. The collections of objects that some Mursi kept in their huts were often, literally, the waste that tourists or other travelers deposited from their cars during

their journeys or items found in the streets of Jinka. However, the consumption and appropriation of alien things play an increasingly important role in their lives, and more and more commodities have been entering their territory. Some of these commodities, such as wristwatches or sunglasses, are the bridges to non-domestic power that attract some Mursi people to another world system that can be seen in the tourists' belongings.

As the example of the bubble blowers and balloons show, although the Mursi are often given certain materials, we often do not understand what has actually been received. "This is partly because the uses to which things were put were not inscribed in them by their metropolitan producers" (Thomas, 1991: 108). As these material identities flow through Mursi everyday life, emerging and disappearing, their cultural appropriation, their spirit and power, is also fluid. As tourists congratulate themselves on amusing the locals, the fluid material identity enables the Mursi to incorporate uncanny materials into their daily lives. After the tourists have left, this liquid magic makes it possible to establish new identities by transforming soap bubble blowers into tobacco containers and fastening them to the plastic belts of Kalashnikovs.

#### NOTES

- (1) My fieldwork and research were supported by the Keimyung University BISA research grant, the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA), and the Leeds Metropolitan University. An earlier draft of this chapter was presented at the BIEA Research Day at St. Hugh's College, Oxford in March, 2011 and later at the "Contact, Magic, Selfhood" workshop in Lisbon. I am grateful to David Picard who invited me to the Lisbon workshop.
- (2) The purpose of my basic research was to understand how members of the Mursi community perceive tourists (Régi, 2011) and how they develop ethnic performances for alien visitors (Régi, 2012; 2013a).
- (3) The Mursi name for tourists was *touristinya* (singular: *touristy*), whereas they referred to white men as *haranchinya* (singular: *haranchi*).
- (4) A newly published book by David Picard and Michael Di Giovine (2014) discusses the "Power of Otherness" in tourism settings and uses the concept of sympathetic magic (originally from James Frazer) to understand how tourists identify/distance themselves with/from host societies. In this case the power (magic) of otherness is applied to the tourists and not to the members of the host society.
- (5) Based on local oral tradition the Mursi have had rifles since the early 20th century.
- (6) The Mursi call all highland Ethiopians *kuchumba*.

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