



MEETINGS WITH MURSI COMMUNITIES TO DISCUSS OMO
NATIONAL PARK AND THE AFRICA PARK FOUNDATION
ETHIOPIA - April 2007

Summary Report for

FIRST PEOPLES WORLDWIDE
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MURSI PRIORITIES IN DEALING WITH THE APF AND OMO PARK

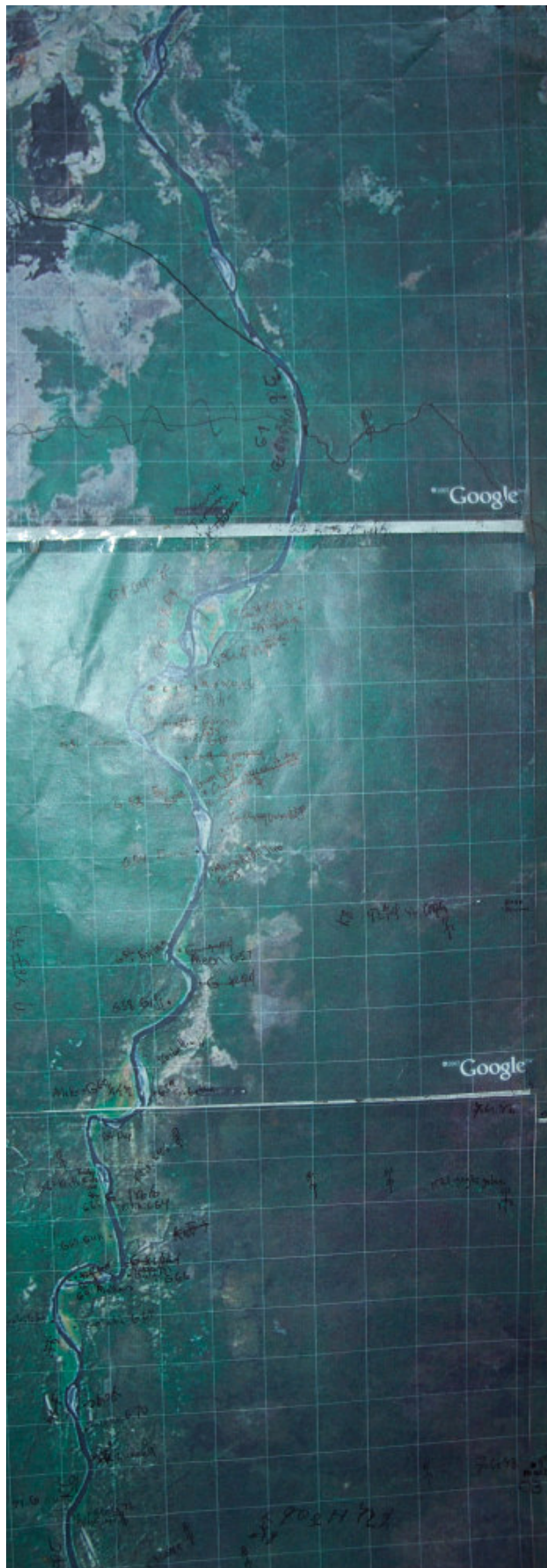
Between April 20 and 29, I travelled with Will Hurd, Olisarali Olibui and Uligidangdor Bidamer to the communities of Make, Miso and Jawal. Word was sent ahead inviting interested peoples from neighbouring villages to the meetings. A list of participants is provided on the last page.

The purpose of the meetings was to hear directly from the Mursi about how they would like to go ahead in dealing with the Omo National Park and Africa Parks Foundation problem - assuming the required financial and technical support could be made available.

The men who came to the meetings were a mixture of community representatives, priests and big men. Although they in no way would claim to represent all Mursi communities, there was an encouraging unanimity about their priorities for taking local action. After detailed discussions about the APF and Omo, they came to agree on four priorities – all of which we shall return to in more detail after a review of events in the outside world; they are:

1. A direct communications/email link to the outside world.
2. Radio or phone communications between Mursi villages.
3. Immersion course in English for eight Mursi, then Amharic.
4. The completion of the map being made with Will Hurd.





SOME SOURCES AND EFFECTS OF GLOBAL SUPPORT FOR THE MURSI

Several global human rights organisations and journalists have been lending effective support to the Mursi, through publications, web-sites, messages of varying intensity to the Ethiopian government, referring them to the global conventions they have signed on to.

The Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL) has drafted a Presentation to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which calls upon the Ethiopian government to respect and guarantee Mursi land rights.

At the national level, the Institute for Environmental Security (IES) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Environmental Law Centre has produced an exhaustive review of existing legal structures and agency policies that affect the Mursi, as obstacles or opportunities, and also the validity of the contracts between the APF and the government.

Also at the global level, these rights-based campaigns have been matched by efforts to secure the support of the global conservation community, including its Ethiopian membership, for the proposition that Mursi stewardship is consistent with the tenets of the Biodiversity Convention, the Man and the Biosphere Programme as well as the emerging category of “community conserved area” (CCA’s) promoted by CEESP within the IUCN.

The landscape is evidently significant enough to be sequestered as a national park. But it is as much a work of the Mursi as of nature. The Park Superintendent himself is on record as acknowledging that the controlled seasonal burning by Mursi, designed to improve cattle pastures also improves the habitat for grazing and browsing wildlife. It is unfortunate that an opportunity to create a model that would be of significance throughout Africa is being ignored in favour of exclusion and coercion.

These global efforts, coupled with the evictions statistics compiled by impeccable World Bank sociologists, and together with a few, widely-read articles in environment or development journals seem to be having a collective effect upon the donor community; something that APF became aware of when the World Bank, upon learning about the Nechisar enforced eviction, refused an informal APF request for funds for Omo park.

POTENTIALS FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

While the rights-based strategies that are in play call upon governments to bring their behaviour into line with their international commitments, conservation-based responses invariably suggest negotiating some form of cooperation or co-management: sharing of control, management responsibilities and revenue. Given the reciprocal relationship between Mursi and their land, and their critical contribution towards the maintenance of high biodiversity, it makes sense to use this as common ground, from which to reach for a reconciliation. the conflict between the Mursi and Omo park. Over the last 40 years, indigenous communities throughout the world have demonstrated that, given the tools and the training, they can assume local responsibilities for biodiversity conservation that opportunistically combine traditional stewardship practice with science-based conservation technique. Most of these groups started out by making a 'tenure map' of the kind the Mursi are now generating and then steadily adding to that nucleus or original knowledge as the basis for an informed agenda.

Co-management demands compromise from both sides and the signs are that the APF is not inclined to depart from a strictly exclusive model. According to some second-hand news, the APF, upon hearing that some Guji are returned to Nechisa NP, are threatening to cancel their contract with the government. Even though not directly responsible for the Nechisar evictions the APF have had no problems with capitalising upon them. And, at this point, even though some sort of collaborative solution *could* happen, this is not the time to bring it up in conversation with the Mursi: partly because it would be dismissed as a trick; partly because it was not their idea.

GTZ, the German development agency, has set aside 200,000 euros towards resolving this conflict. However, it is unclear how those funds will be spent. GTZ did not respond to mail from FPW, so there is only the following hearsay to go by. According to one source, these funds will be disbursed under GTZ control. According to another, GTZ is seeking a "win-win" solution. Also mentioned is an intent to map community resources uses, from the ground and from the park aeroplane. So far, there have been no invitation to Mursi communities to participate in any conflict resolution or mapping processes. The Mursi priority is to inform themselves and reflect upon their options: the longer that GTZ delays, the better the eventual prospects for reconciliation.





RELATIONS BETWEEN THE MURSI AND THE APF/OMO

The Mursi who attended the meetings were unanimous in their total distrust of the APF. Even though not facing imminent eviction, the Mursi are subjected to progressive restrictions, from prohibitions upon all hunting to certain tree-cutting as well as incremental enlargements of the park area; all of these without any attempts to inform or consult Mursi communities. They are also well aware that the APF indulges in “chief-making” - using fake authorities to place thumbprints on agreements. In 2005, residents of the community of Kon Ba were told that their houses would be burned if they didn’t leave immediately.

In their dealings with outsiders, the Mursi are disadvantaged by an almost complete information deficit. Omo NP has existed for over 40 years, yet they remain unaware and uninformed of its boundaries. The park is supposedly demarcated, but discretely, with a few, inconspicuous boundary markers. But the Mursi are adamant that they have agreed only to a no-go zone of 5km radius around the park offices, with the proviso that their cattle could use that zone in times of drought.

Besides invisible, the boundaries are also elastic. The park superintendent recently announced that he has a “legal-tender” videotape in which the Mursi agree to the park boundaries being shifted from the west to the east bank of the Omo River, which would completely deny Mursi access to the river. The dismissed as absurd the notion that they would volunteer to lose access to the river. Well aware that the government had reneged on promises of compensation to the dispossessed residents of Nechisar park, they were not about to enter into any negotiations. Their attitudes are further hardened by the recent leasing, without consultation, of a large part of their territory to a sports hunting lodge. The current degree of distrust is such that the Mursi no longer feel there is any point in talking with the APF. This is not the time to bring “win-win” ideas up for discussion. Given these absences, of trust and of information, the Mursi see no option but resistance

The Mursi are excluded not only from their pastures and riverine forests, and also from a fair share in the revenues generated by tourism. Only a few have jobs on park staff. They are well aware of the trophy fees in the thousands paid in trophy fees for hunting waterbuck and kudu on their recently-appropriated territory—compared to their take, of \$0.25 per photo trophy in the Mursi tourist village.

A few years back, the Mursi territory came under pressure by Nyangatom moving north from the Sudan border. They were well-armed, and it was not until the Mursi acquired comparable weaponry that they were able to contain the Nyangatom incursion, although not reverse it. Some people at the meetings drew attention to how effective this could be, and this option has not be excluded from debate.



ADDRESSING THE MURSI INFORMATION DEFICIT

The four Mursi Priorities summarised below are all about information and communication: acquiring, controlling, circulating, generating, and using the information they need to deal with their situation posed by the APF and Omo park. Attempts at reconciliation, or the negotiation of a co-management regime, should wait until the Mursi have informed themselves to the point where ready to talk. At the the meetings, I undertook to convey the four requests for support to donors in North America and Europe and report back to them by the time that they hope to finish the mapping, if possible by the end of June. Below are summary details on the. Comments on parallel activities and follow-up are *italicised*.

1. Direct internet communication with the outside world.

The missionary email is no longer accessible to them for discussing Omo Park matters, now deemed too 'political'. A few places in Jinka have slow and intermittent email (3-12 hours from Mursi communities). *A Jinka site might serve as a stop gap, but FPW should also research the technical options and costs for direct email connections to communities. Native Solutions to Conservation Refugees (NSCR) is working on a Mursi web site and is in contact with a constituency of support groups and persons.*

2. Short Wave Radio Connections between all, or nodal, Mursi communities.

Jinka is not yet covered by a cell-phone network so an inter-community radio net is probably the most practical. It possible that technology could be shared with the first option. *So FPW should research these two topics in unison.*

3. Language Training for Eight Mursi

Language training was requested for both English and Amharic, with English the priority. The first meeting suggested five initial trainees; the second raised this to eight. One option, for a facility, would be to house the training in a house in Jinka. *Tadesse Wolde (Cristensen Fdtn Ethiopia desk) has also been looking into language training.*

4. That the Map of Mursi Territory, Resources and Practices be Completed

The first three priorities are about the verbal or electronic passage of information. This fourth, the mapping process is ultimately about gathering, from traditional knowledge and stewardship practice, material for a unique territorial data base, controlled by Mursi. *Will Hurd has submitted a request for \$20K, to take the map from now to the point where it is completed and on a Mursi web-site. Will has yet to hear from the donor.*



CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

Publicity and pressure at the global level are having modest but discernable effects in favour of the Mursi. Some donors are reluctant to support the APF; others are ready to support actions by Mursi communities to deal themselves with this situation. Human rights groups are calling for recognition of Mursi land rights; environment and development NGO's call for a specific recognition of Mursi contribution to regional biodiversity stewardship – by for example, looking to negotiate a co-management or cooperative regime for Omo park.

However at the local level, relations between the Mursi and the Africa Parks Foundation are steadily deteriorating. Mursi maintain that the PAF have broken their word several times. They also have the dubious advantage of witnessing what happened to Guji communities forced to move from Nech Sar National Park, abandoned on inferior land, and denied promised compensation. Although APF may protest that it is the government that is pushing for relocation, not they; that distinction is irrelevant to the Mursi on the receiving end. Given this total lack of trust, the Mursi are unlikely to respond to any invitations to discuss the pros and cons of various co-management scenarios; these would be seen solely as a con.

Asked what they would do if the financial and technical resources could be provided, the Mursi articulated, and unanimously supported, four courses of action, designed to provide them with the information, contact with networks and capacities needed to develop their own agenda and fight their corner themselves. Mursi objectives and strategy are consistent with the purposes of the Indigenous Stewardship Initiative and it would be well worth FPW collaborating with other active donors in supporting these four actions, since some parts of the action plan are already the subject of requests for funding. Also, it may be possible to seek either advice or funds from CTA Wageningen, which is mandated to support community uses of ICT's - Information and Communication Technologies and which, like the APF is based in the Netherlands.



The following Mursi actively participated in the series of meetings held at Makki, Miso and Jawal. Those identified as representatives or priests are locally recognised as authorities

Nebiale Bale: representative of Mugjo
 Chardirinameri Ulibi: representative of Mugjo
 Cartiramai Dunigey: representative of Biogolokare
 Rabigo Toku: priest of Mugjo
 Runebikowlo Archai: priest, representative of Baruba
 Mederinameri Nokulu: representative of Mugjo
 Mederinamei Laza: representative of Biogolokare
 Uriang Bui Luwiatcare: representative of Mugjo
 Lugolanyiholi Semejare: local government official
 Nomanycibo Bibi:
 Lugolany Konu Sabaholi
 Komujare Kongachu
 Olisarali Olibui (English speaker)
 Uligidangdor Bidameri

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