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In memoriam David Turton 1941-2023

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Obituary: In Memory of David Turton (1940-2023)

Jon Abbink¹

On 9 December 2023 the scholarly communities in Ethiopian Studies and social anthropology lost a pre-eminent member: the British anthropologist David A. Turton. He was 83 years old. Born in 1940, he had a distinguished, varied career over many decades. He died after several years of declining health.

David made invaluable and pioneering contributions to the study of Ethiopia's ethno-cultural diversity, to theoretical interpretations of agro-pastoralist peoples, notably the Mursi (Mun) people, to the evaluation of Ethiopian ethnic federalism, and to the study of migrants and refugees, also those outside Northeast Africa (See for instance, his 2002 report, with Peter Marsden, on Afghan refugees). He was also a wonderful man, sensitive, sharp, understanding and kind to all, including younger scholars. He leaves a notable legacy as a scholar and as a human being.

In his long career of research, teaching, journal editing (of *Disasters*, and of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*) and public advocacy, Turton worked at Manchester University, the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre, and Oxford University. In addition to his pathbreaking field research and numerous publications in quality journals, he was in the vanguard of ethnographic film-making (producing six films for Granada TV, UK, with director Leslie Woodhead). In addition, he served on the board of several NGOs and other associations.

In the past few decades David became a staunch advocate of indigenous and minority rights. He also took the initiative for a pioneering website (www.mursi.org) on the Mursi/Mun people, the agro-pastoralists whom he 'put on the map' and amongst whom he had started his PhD research in 1969. His initial interest had been in the small Kwegu minority living *among* the Mursi (and also found among neighbouring peoples along the Omo River, like the Bodi and Tishana Me'en), but he ended up studying the Mursi themselves, writing his 1973 PhD thesis on them. His first publication on the Mursi appeared in 1971, under the eye-catching title 'Mursi tribe on the Plain of Death'.

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David's published works on this people (see the bibliography below) were in-depth and comprehensive. He demonstrated their complex culture and socio-economic organization as well as their humanity and strength in strings of articles, chapters and reports. He stimulated many other researchers, both in Ethiopia and from abroad, to investigate related (agro-pastoral) groups and do comparative work on key anthropological themes relevant to these groups, such as political organization and oratory, (cattle) colour classification, pastoralist cultural ecology, and (violent) conflict, as well as ethno-archaeology. His papers and chapters are beautifully and cogently written, and a great pleasure to read. This work was quite influential among a whole generation of researchers that came after him, and I remember how excited I was myself when discovering his papers when I prepared for research among the Me'en and Suri people. We later exchanged information, news and views on the Ethiopian Southwest and he always generously sent me and so many other colleagues his published and unpublished papers.

Over the years, David came to develop a deep concern for the fate of smaller minorities like the Mursi, confronted with Ethiopian state-gearred efforts to 'develop', or rather steamroller over them and impair their habitats and tested ways of life in the name of a top-down idea of 'modernity'. This drew him into his advocacy, with the frequent writing of pleas to authorities to exercise restraint and reason, and at least listen to and involve the local peoples 'targeted' for change. To that effect, he sent well-informed opinion pieces and personal letters to the relevant authorities and made presentations to wider audiences. This he already did under the *Derg* regime (from 1974 to 1991).² It is also what social scientists should do: not only research and publish their academic studies for a small audience, but also inform and appeal to a larger public and to policy-makers. Unfortunately but predictably, Turton's efforts – always backed up with relevant facts and reasonable observations – often received little response from the authoritarian/ideological decision-makers in place. Nevertheless, his commitment and activities in these matters were important and often he appeared to have been right in his analyses.

While his ethnographic record on Southwestern Ethiopia is invaluable, Turton not only worked on this area and its peoples. Next to his edited book on the

² Among the first of these are his 'Recommendations to *Guad* Amara Gebre Gebrekidan, chief administrator of Gamu Gofa Province, on development assistance to the Mursi' (1986; p. 4) and his 1987 text, 'A visit to the Mursi in December 1987: report and recommendations' (17 p.; written after the big war between Nyangatom and Mursi when hundreds were killed). Many other reports would follow.

politics of Ethiopian ethnic federalism (2006), he also edited three short books with Julia González (1999, 2000, and 2003) on ethnic diversity, ethnic minorities and refugees in Europe: a surprising aspect of his work that is not well-known but reflects his life-long concern with refugees and migration issues. This work emerged during his association with the Refugee Studies Centre in Oxford, and no doubt also partly stemmed from his research on the (mobile) Mursi, who were either out of choice (as transhumant pastoralists) or due to state coercion, frequently induced to migrate.

Turton's broad range of interests thus made him a versatile and influential scholar in his field, not in the least due to that fruitful connection he made between scholarly work and advocacy. In his many appeals to authorities and organizations to take into account the position and interests of local peoples to be affected by imposed 'development schemes' (to which he was not categorically opposed), he was factually well-informed and courteous but also insistent. Examples are his interventions since 2006 on the negative effects of the big Gibe-3 dam on local livelihoods – his analyses and those of many colleagues were amply vindicated in subsequent years –, his objections to the management (since 2004) of the Omo and Nech'-Sar National Parks by the African Parks Foundation,³ and his published concerns on the photographic exploitation of local 'picturesque' people like the Mursi for touristic, media, and commercial purposes – a concern we fellow anthropologists of the Ethiopian Southwest also shared. For instance, on 17 November 2006 David sent a letter to the editor of the German *Hör Zu* magazine, objecting to a sexist photograph⁴ on the November 2006 cover of a Mursi (or Suri) woman basically depicted as a piece of property of a Western male consumer. A characteristic intervention of David, testifying to his concern and respect for the people he studied.

Assessing his scientific and advocacy legacy, we could say that as an anthropologist, David contributed pathbreaking and inspiring studies of the themes mentioned above, such as human ecology/cultural ecology, ethnicity, human displacement and 'developmental' problems, but also to ethno-astronomy and ethno-history, specifically of the Mursi. The articles on these latter topics were

³ This Foundation abandoned the management of these parks in October 2008, due to complications and unforeseen problems regarding legal challenges to the intended displacement of people living in and near the parks.

⁴ For the picture, see Jon Abbink (2009), Suri images: the return of exoticism and the commodification of an Ethiopian "tribe". *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 196, p. 903.

always based on meticulous data and sound reasoning, and are lasting contributions. His efforts on behalf of the local groups in Southwest Ethiopia have notably informed public and scientific debate on indigenous rights and contributed to local peoples becoming more awareness of the issues at stake. In his contributions to seminars and conferences he was not only thoughtful and always well-informed but also quietly inspiring and persuasive.

In the last year of his life, he fortunately could make a return trip to Ethiopia, with Pat, his wife, and his son Danny, and visit the Mursi. A public celebration of David Turton's life and work was held on Saturday 20 July 2024 in St. Peters Church, Northchurch Terrace, London.

We remember David Turton as an eminent anthropologist who left a solid and fascinating body of work which contributed to the visibility and emancipation of smaller ethnic groups like the Mursi and their neighbours, and as a kind, sympathetic man of great personal integrity. His memory and his work will live on.

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