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A FORM OF SELF-HARM?
Opening the dialogue on 'harmful cultural practices' in southern Ethiopia*

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I question whether gender equality can be attained if those trying to uphold human rights do not consider the varied experiences of people who practice so-called 'harmful cultural practices'. I use the example of lip-plates, worn by Mursi girls and women, to show how campaigns to eradicate harmful cultural practices in southern Ethiopia often send contradictory and confusing messages that may do more harm than good.

Introduction

In Mursi (also Mun), lip-plates are rhetorically praised as a symbol of strength, beauty and womanliness.[1] When describing the conventions of courtly advances, for example, Mursi women will playfully discuss the subordinate position that men find themselves in when courting girls, especially ones with brass bracelets (*lalanga*) and lip-plates (*dhebinya tugoiny*, singular *dhebi-a-tugoiny*), since such 'mature girls' (*bansanaanya*, singular *bansaanai*) are said to have the power to grant or deny their suitors' requests (LaTosky 2010). Lip-plates are more frequently worn by unmarried girls and newly wed women than by older married women with children.[2] Girls and women insert their lip-plates on three main occasions: when serving men food, when milking cows, and during important ritual events (such as weddings, stick-duelling competitions, or dances). Unmarried girls, especially those with large labrets, might wear them whenever they are in public (e.g. when fetching water or visiting friends).[3] The lip-plate not only symbolises beauty, it is also a commitment to one's husband and is worn with great pride when serving one's husband food. If the husband dies the lip-plate is removed, since a woman's external beauty is said to fade after her husband's death.

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1 'Mun' (singular Muni) is a self-designation, whereas 'Mursi' is the term given to them by outsiders. The latter is increasingly used by the Mun in representations of themselves to the outside world.

2 In the past, both unmarried girls and married women with children frequently wore them.

3 It is expected that a boyfriend or husband will not sleep with his girlfriend or his bride until her lip has been pierced and fully healed. However, nowadays more and more men sleep with their girlfriends or brides even before they have pierced their lips.

> When my husband died, I threw my *sarnyogi* [leather cord fastened to the women's front skirt] into the fire. I threw my lip-plate into the bushes and removed all of my [arm and ankle] bracelets. If you are [a widow] like this [holding her bare arms in front of her], you are eternally bare [*gidhangi dhog*];[4] you are no longer beautiful (Bikalumi Sabakoro, Mako, 12 April 2009, recorded interview).

Today, fewer and fewer girls are piercing their lips at puberty, a painful process which can take up to one year.[5] This has mainly to do with the fact that the lip-plate has come under close scrutiny, particularly by outsiders, as something harmful to girls and women.

Harmful traditional practices (HTPs), also referred to as 'harmful cultural practices', are identified in United Nations (UN) terms as being harmful to the health of women and girls, as arising from the material differences of power between the sexes, as being for the benefit of men and as creating stereotyped images of masculinity and femininity which damages the opportunities of women and girls and which are being justified as tradition.[6] According to UN Fact Sheet No. 23,

> [e]very social grouping in the world has specific traditional cultural practices and beliefs, some of which are beneficial to all members, while others are harmful to a specific group, such as women [...]. Despite their harmful nature and their violation of international human rights laws, such practices persist because they are not questioned and take on an aura of morality in the eyes of those practising them (UN 1995).

In Ethiopia, the reasons for labelling certain cultural practices as 'harmful' are often unclear and ambiguous. For instance, claims that lip-plates are harmful to women's health or that they mark girls and women as subordinate remain unsubstantiated.[7]

I argue that attempts to intervene in women's bodily practices in southern Ethiopia, particularly the labelling of lip-plates as a 'harmful cultural practice', do not always promote the interests, well-being and lived experiences of women, but instead make them hostage to contingent ideas about what best promotes 'gender justice'. In addition

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4 This is similar to the way in which the Bodi perceive widows. See Buffavand (2008:79).

5 Mursi girls pierce their lips when they reach puberty and gradually stretch the bottom lip with small wooden and clay plugs in order ulimately to be able to fit a large pottery labret.

6 See UN (1995) and Jeffreys (2005). This definition of HTP targets mainly, though not exclusively, women and children. One common critique of the UN definition is that there is no recognition of practices that fit people into gender-stereotypical categories in the West, such as genital cutting, labiaplasty, or gender reassignment. See especially Jeffreys (2005) and Wynter, Thompson and Jeffreys (2002).

7 In a recent announcement at an international seminar on "Harmful practices and human rights", organised by the International Institute for the Rights of the Child (IDE), lip-plates are included as an example of a harmful traditional practice, though it remains unclear why they are considered 'harmful' (see IDE 2010). In the announcement it is written that, 'there are many forms of HTPs in the world, and a high prevalence of certain forms. We can mention: female genital mutilations (FGM), early or child marriages, forced marriages, honour killings, children's witchcraft, scarification, infants' giraffes, lip-plates, force-feeding' (IDE 2010).

to the rhetoric generated about the harmfulness of lip-plates, myths about their origin continue to be perpetuated. The central aim of this paper is to open up a much-needed dialogue on 'harmful traditional practices' in southern Ethiopia. In this case, I explore the practice of wearing pottery lip-plates as a starting point. Some of the questions I explore are: Why are women's lip-plates considered harmful? Whose right is it to decide or impose the idea that wearing a lip-plate is an example of self-harm? How and by whom are the Mursi being consulted about the harmfulness of this practice? Do Mursi girls and women perceive this cultural practice as harmful? Finally, I suggest that empowering girls and women to make decisions about their own bodies can also be seen as a basic human right that should be respected and understood by giving women the opportunity to discuss their own views and experiences of such practices.

Labelling lip-plates as 'primitive'

In 2011, I met a Mursi friend, Ngadhôle Dhedheb, whom I have known since 2003. Two photos that I took of her were included in my doctoral thesis: the first photo showed her wearing a large pottery lip-plate in 2004 (figure 1); the second was taken in 2009 (figure 2), after she stopped wearing her lip-plate (see LaTosky 2010:161). The predicament that she faced at that time was that she wanted to go to school outside Mursiland, but feared that the townspeople would tease her because of her long, stretched bottom lip. When I met Ngadhôle again in 2011, she had finally sewn her bottom lip back so that no one could tell that she has once worn a six-inch lip-plate (figure 3). Below she explains why she decided to abandon the traditional practice of wearing the lip-plate and her subsequent experience:

Shauna: Why did you sew up your lip?
Ngadhôle: I wanted to go to school.
Shauna: Did the people in Mako [Mursi] talk about you?
Ngadhôle: Yes, they asked: 'Why did you sew up [your lip]? This is our tradition! Why did you abandon your culture?' Many of the elders said that what I did was bad, but a few agreed that it was good to go to school.
Shauna: Was this your decision?
Ngadhôle: It was my decision. It's my story. I went to the tall foreign doctor in Jinka and paid with my own money: 400 ETB![8] Nobody told me to do this. It's the same if a girl wants a lip-plate; that's her decision. I didn't want the clay [lip-plate] anymore. I am glad I did this. People treat me differently than those with lip-plates. Now I can walk tall and proud through town. My ear plates still show that I am Mursi (Ngadhôle Dhedheb, Jinka, 8 March 2012, recorded interview).

8 400 Ethiopian Birr (ETB) are approximately equivalent to 24 USD.

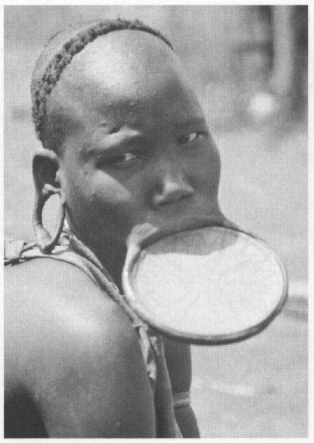

Fig. 1: Ngadhôle Dhedheb (2004) (all photos: Shauna LaTosky)

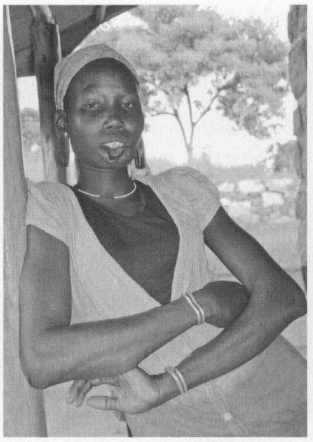

Fig. 2: Ngadhôle Dhedheb (2009)

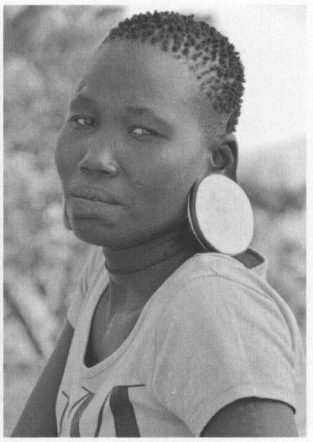

Fig. 3: Ngadhôle Dhedheb (2012)

Today, lip-plates are perceived by many outsiders and some individual Mursi as harmful, though their reasons often differ considerably. As Ngadhhôle's response above indicates, Mursi schoolgirls regard lip-plates as harmful in so far as they can restrict access to resources (e.g. formal education) and damage ones self-esteem and sense of pride, especially when worn outside Mursiland, where lip-plates are highly stigmatised (see LaTosky 2006). As one Mursi girl explained:

> Now some of the younger girls are no longer piercing their lips so they can go to school. I have already pierced mine. I want to start school here in Jinka – Grade 4.[9] The people from the school and in town tell me to sew up my lip. Even the policemen pester me and say: 'Sew, sew, sew up your lip!' I tell them: 'If I do that my lip will look bad. I don't want to. I want to look like this. I am a Mursi. This is our culture!' (Ngarora Tula, Jinka, 27 December 2011, recorded interview).

Outside pressure to eliminate lip-plates has to do with common perceptions that they are a sign of being 'uneducated' and 'backwards'. In certain non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government circles they are also considered to be against women's rights and harmful to the health of girls and women. As one schoolgirl from Arba Minch described it:

> Lip-plates are worn for the purpose of beauty. It is when our breasts get big that we start to pierce our lips. If we did not go to school, we would all have pierced our lips by now. We will not do it, though. It is bad enough that we have long earlobes. Here [in Arba Minch]

9 Jinka is a town in southern Ethiopia, approximately forty kilometres from Mursiland.

> we are teased by people in the town because of our ears.[10] The teachers also tell us not to continue with this. They say we should teach our children not to do this, not to continue with this bad practice. The teacher told you it is because of HIV. I don't know what it has to do with HIV; we only use a small knife once to pierce the lip (Lalabo Kalamederi, Arba Minch, 12 January 2012, recorded interview).

The labelling of lip-plates as primitive first began at the hands of explorers. The published account of the Italian Geographical Society expedition to the Lower Omo Valley in 1896, which was led by Vittorio Bottego, gives the following description of the Mursi:

> The women are ugly and dirty, completely naked except for their sides, which they cover with a straight piece of leather. We met some who had large holes in the ears and in their bottom lips, in which they inserted wooden discs, with a circumference of five to six centimetres. This primitive tribe has despicable tendencies and bestial habits [...] (Vannutelli and Citerni 2006:323; translation Federico Guzzoni).

Labelling the Mursi as 'primitive' continues. Such images are found especially in the exotic portrayals of women with lip-plates, as demonstrated in everything from travel blogs and websites to travelogues (e.g. Cropp 1990) and travel guidebooks (e.g. Briggs 2006). David Turton, who has carried out ethnographic research in Mursi for over four decades, identifies lip-plates as one of the most exoticised features among the Mursi that give strength to such primitivist labels:

> Judging by its ubiquitous appearance in travel brochures, advertisements and on postcards, the lip-plate has become, for those organizing tours to the Omo lowlands, a symbol which encapsulates the quintessentially 'tribal' and 'untouched' existence of the Mursi (Turton 2005:274).

In southern Ethiopia 'Mursi woman' have become objects of foreign desire. This is not only apparent in the ways in which Mursi are described in tour brochures, but also in exotic stories told by many non-Mursi tour guides.[11] For instance, in December 2011 a group of Belgian tourists visited the museum at the South Omo Research Center in Jinka, where I began to work shortly after completing my dissertation on the "Predicaments of Mursi women in a changing world" (LaTosky 2010). One couple asked if it was true that the lip-plates of Mursi women were originally a way to disfigure them so that slave traders would find them despicable – a myth which Turton (2004) debunked years ago. When I asked where they learned this, they responded: 'Our tour guide from Addis'. Without a doubt the continuing widespread appeal of the 'noble savage' rhetoric, or what anthropologist Serge Tornay refers to as the revival of the 'primitivist myth'

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10 In 2012, sixteen Mursi students (six girls and ten boys) were enrolled at the Arba Minch Adult Boarding School. Arba Minch, the largest town in southern Ethiopia, is a two-day drive from Mursiland.

11 In early 2012, there was still no 'certified' Mursi tour guide.

(quoted in Abbink 2009:894), is exploited today primarily by the tourist market and the popular media.[12] That primitivist depictions of the Mursi continue to have power and vitality is also evidenced in the ways in which several government agencies and NGOs endeavouring to work with Mursi communities portray and interpret images of Mursi women with lip-plates as a kind of 'imposed disability' (cf. Russell 2010:18).

The lip-plate has come under close scrutiny as a symbol of female disfigurement, oppression, and even poor health.[13] It is important to emphasise that over the last decade, efforts to eliminate so-called 'harmful' practices have also been supported by NGOs currently working in southern Ethiopia, such as Save the Children and AMREF. As one spokesperson for AMREF explains, changing Mursi attitudes about lip-plates has been an important achievement:

> In the neighbouring Moyzo village, AMREF has catalysed a process to get the conservative Mursi community to stop the cultural practice of lip lengthening. Women in the community traditionally have their lower incisors removed and lower lips pierced and stretched until they are hanging way below their chins, putting them at risk of infection and denying them the use of their lower lips. At a meeting organised by AMREF and the Department of Women's Affairs in June this year, community leaders agreed to stop lip piercing but insisted that they would continue to pull out the [lower] incisors as it was the only way they could feed sick people who were unable to eat.[14]
>
> 'Getting them to agree to change the practice was a very big accomplishment. It takes time to change attitude and behaviour, particularly if [it] has to do with culture. But we always listen to the community so that decisions are made based on their needs and priorities', says Ibrahim [AMREF representative] (AMREF 2010a).

AMREF's claim that women's lip-plates are a threat to women's health because they put them at risk of infection and deny them the use of their lower lips is similar to claims that they impair women's speech or their ability to eat. However, since lip-plates are something that girls today have the liberty to choose for themselves, such claims run the risk of denying women agency over their own bodies and of ignoring Mursi knowledge of traditional medicine and treatments used to prevent the infections of wounds. This also appears to contradict one of AMREF's goals in South Omo, which is 'to exam-

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12 The spectacular ways in which Mursi women 'dress up' for tourists feed the desires of the increasing number of tourists and photographers who travel to Ethiopia. Freelance photographer Ingetje Tadros' exotic images of Mursi girls and women are another good example (Tadros 2010).

13 In 2011, for example, the German travel agency Studiosus was planning to cancel all of its tours to Mursiland after its board members decided that women's lip-plates were a form of female disfigurement and oppression (Ruth Hopfer-Kubsch, personal communication, Munich, 9 May 2011). In 2007, the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) identified lip-plates as harmful to women's health and began a campaign to stop 'lip lengthening' (AMREF 2010a). This helps explain why the reconstructive lip surgery of three Mursi women was included in one of AMREF's annual performance reports (Nigatu 2008:9).

14 Having the lower incisors removed does not help a sick person to eat, but rather to drink, since water can still be poured through the hole created by the missing lower incisors.

ine the possibility of using traditional healing techniques alongside modern treatment methods' (AMREF 2010b). Here the medical gaze clashes with women's experiences: not only is the lip-plate removed to eat, drink, and talk (though all three are still possible while wearing a lip-plate), but lip and earlobe infections are effectively treated using local remedies.

What has not been considered is the constant care with which Mursi women treat infected wounds. In fact, how one takes care of a freshly pierced lip is rhetorically articulated by Mursi women (and men) as revealing a girl's commitment and courage to follow through with her choice to become a 'mature girl'. One can frequently observe women and girls carefully applying to a freshly pierced bottom lip or earlobes a tree- and plant-based substance (*lômmai*) that, when made into a white (or black) paste, is used to heal wounds.[15] Since a fully healed bottom lip and fully stretched earlobes embody a sense of well-being, beauty and womanliness, women and girls take great care to ensure that both remain healthy and intact (figure 4). The claim, then, that lip-plates are harmful to women's health suggests that few efforts have been made to bring Mursi women together to share and extend their knowledge of the healing methods involved, not to mention their understanding of what it means to wear a lip-plate. Furthermore, at a time when lip and especially ear piercings and labrets are becoming a more and more common component of beauty in the West, arguments that depict the lip-plates of Mursi women as posing a risk of self-harm expose the arbitrariness and thus inadequacy of constructing Mursi women's rights within a space dominated by notions of harmful cultural or traditional practices.[16]

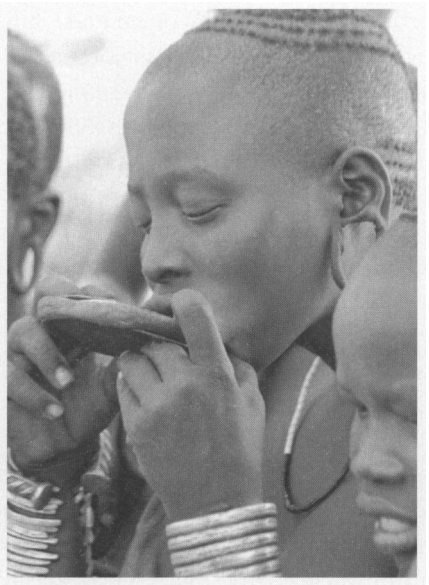

Fig. 4: Ngonta Biochaga inserting her lip-plate (2009)

15 According to Turton (1995:24), the *lômmai* tree (Ximenia Americana L. Olacaeae) is also used to treat the feet of animals with foot and mouth disease (*baga*). Once a lip has been stretched to fit a clay lip-plate, *lômmai* is prepared by roasting it in the fire to prepare a black ointment to apply to the lip (Olikorro Dumalo, Jinka, 23 December 2011).

16 Lip-piercing and stretching do not cause any more physical harm than body piercing and branding, yet the latter forms of body modification have become common place and socially acceptable in the West (cf. Donohue 2000:18).

Harmful traditional practices, or paternalistic prohibitions?

The concept of harmful traditional or cultural practices originates within the UN's concerns to identify and eliminate forms of harm to women and children that do not easily fit into a human rights framework (UN 1995). In Article 2 of the "UN declaration on the elimination of violence against women", it is stated that:

> Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following: (a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation [...] (UN 1993).

The survey on harmful traditional practices was commissioned in 1989 by the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC 1987). In 1993, in Ethiopia, a National Policy on Women was adopted to introduce and implement gender-sensitive policies on harmful customs and practices (Haile Gabriel 2010:7). By 1997, a national baseline survey to assess the prevalence of all harmful traditional practices was being undertaken by the National Committee on Traditional Practices in Ethiopia (NCTPE). This survey and the government policies on harmful cultural practices have since been adopted by several ministries, including the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, Health, Police and Courts, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, as well as NGOs leading support efforts (Haile Gabriel 2010:7). In Sala-Mago Woreda, an administrative district which includes Mursi, Dime, Bodi and Konso resettled in Bodi territory, the list of traditional harmful practices includes abduction into marriage, the seclusion of mothers after childbirth, cutting of women's lips (Mursi and Bodi), and cutting a woman's stomach if a child is born through a breech birth. Although government campaigns to eliminate harmful traditional practices have been in place since the 1970s, over the last decade renewed attempts have been made to enforce such programs. It remains unclear, however, which traditional practices are being targeted and why. Cutting a woman's stomach in a breech birth is especially puzzling since caesarean sections are not performed locally in Mursi.

In October 2011, a meeting was organised by the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Jinka with the aim of educating the Bodi about why women and men should stop piercing their ears and women their bottom lips to fit a small lip plug (called a *kongu* in Bodi). One Bodi man explained that the main reason why he chose not to attend was because he had already been to such a meeting and found that such campaigns were filled with contradictory messages. He stated that,

> [i]t's not only the Mursi who are being told to stop piercing their lips; they [government] are telling the Bodi to do the same. There was a meeting about such things in Jinka yesterday. We have had meetings like this in Bodi too. When they came to our place I asked

> why the *kochumbai* [Ethiopians from central and northern Ethiopia] cut [circumcise] their penises. I then asked: 'Has a Bodi woman ever died from having her lip pierced?' 'No!' 'But what about those [*kochumbai*] who cut their penises?' If we are told to stop piercing our women's lips, then they should stop cutting their penises.[17]

In southern Ethiopia, a relatively new priority for state and non-state parties is the management of women's bodies through education and public health. This is the case not only in Mursiland but also in other areas, such as Dime and Bodi, and especially Nyangatom, Hamar, Bashada, Banna and Karo, where the Ministry of Women's Affairs, in cooperation with Save the Children, are campaigning against dozens of traditional practices. The emergence of such campaigns have confused many people as to why certain practices, such as 'wearing necklaces' in Nyangatom (an important way of displaying one's female identity) or 'post-partum seclusion' in Mursi and Bodi (an essential period of bonding between mother and child), have been labelled 'harmful'. Since, in the case of lip-plates, Mursi women do not label them as such, there is a general perception that their freedom to continue to choose to wear lip-plates is being severely compromised. This is indicated in conversations, like the one below, between two senior Mursi women, Nyabisse and Ngadogomi, and a schoolgirl called Ngarora:

> Nyabisse: The schoolgirls come and tell stories. The *mengisi* [government] says that if the girls continue to pierce their lips they will be thrown in jail.
> Ngarora: Yes, the woman who does the piercing and the girl with a fresh wound will be thrown in jail. That's what the *mengisi* say. Those who already have lip-plates will not [be imprisoned], only those with a fresh wound.
> Shauna: Is this true?
> Ngadogomi: We don't know if it is true or not. If it is true, let them come. I will tell them that these are the ways of our ancestors. I will tell them that the lip-plate is very powerful! (Mursi women, Mako, 19 September 2008, recorded interview)

To pierce or not to pierce girls' lips?

The choice of girls and women to continue or abandon this practice remains a contested issue in Mursi. While the parents of schoolchildren discourage their children from continuing it so that they will not be teased at boarding schools outside Mursiland, some people feel that a stretched lip without a lip-plate is meaningless and even inappropri-

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17 Bodi man, Jinka, 29 October 2011, recorded conversation. I am grateful to the anthropologist Lucie Buffavand for initiating this discussion in the Bodi language and for her comments on a draft of this paper. She explained that in Bodi women with more than one child wear a small wooden lip-plug. Unlike in Mursi, where a lip-plate is worn by unmarried girls and married women and thrown away after the death of one's husband, a *kongu* is typically worn at all times, even after the death of one's husband (Lucie Buffavand, Jinka, 1 November 2011).

ate. During a workshop on "Mursi youth's perspectives on change" in 2008, several young men commented that girls should not continue the practice if they cannot live up to its specific aesthetic intention.[18] One young man even expressed disgust at the thought of a woman's drool dripping into the flour she grinds for the porridge that he will eat. Similar comments are made by senior men as well:

> It was better when they pierced their lips in the past. They would wear the clay [lip-plate] forever. They always served their husband with it. The clay [*dhebi*] was only removed if the husband died. Now they get married and the women just stop [wearing them]. Even the girls will pierce their lips and after two days they will just stop like that. Now the drool comes and comes and we don't like this. The women didn't drool like this in the past because they always wore their big beautiful lip-plates. I told [my daughter] Luke to just leave it. Now they just let their lips dangle like that. I don't know why that is (Kirinomeri Tokô, Mako, 17 April 2009, recorded conversation).

To what extent the size and shape, as well as specific aesthetic intentions, have changed over time is linked to both internal and external cultural pressures. For example, more recently, people have begun to talk about two broad categories of lip-plates: 'lip-plates for tourists' (*dhebinya turusinyawng*) and 'real Mursi lip-plates' (*dhebinya Munuiny*) worn by girls and women.[19] While tourism has created a demand for lip-plates, thus changing their aesthetic look, other outsiders are said to be having a more negative impact. As one Mursi man explained:

> The people from the towns dislike our custom. They tell us to wear clothes, to not kill animals for skins, and some even say that the government will throw us in jail if we keep piercing our lips. I don't know if this is true. This is our custom; these are the ways of our ancestors. I want my daughter to pierce her ears and lip, but if she is afraid of the pain I will tell her to leave it (Oliholi Tula, Belamer, 14 April 2009, recorded interview).

Although it is still too early to determine the extent to which external pressures are influencing the practice of wearing lip-plates, especially given the fact that outsiders working with the Mursi tend to vary in their support of traditional practices, education appears to be having the greatest impact. Evidence of this is found in the increasing number of schoolgirls in Arba Minch, Jinka and Mako who are choosing not to pierce their lips.[20]

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18 I would like to thank the South Omo Research Center for supporting this workshop.

19 'Lip-plates for tourists' are also referred to as 'dhebinya katalcha turrussi' (literally 'lip-plates tourists buy'). Lip-plates sold to tourists are typically not polished (e.g. using pumpkin seeds or milk) and do not reflect the present size of 'real Mursi lip-plates', which tend to be smaller and have a smoother texture than those sold to tourists.

20 On 7 November 2011, I visited Mursi students at an adult boarding school in Arba Minch. Within the first years of going to school, many Mursi girls are now replicating the hairstyles and dress of highland Ethiopians and foreigners. This includes not piercing and stretching one's bottom lip. From my own

While the public discourse in Mursi would have us believe that the pressure for women to have lip-plates comes from men and that piercing and stretching a Mursi girl's bottom lip at puberty marks her as subordinate, my research shows that lip-plates are considered to be a personal choice, an aesthetic symbol of beauty, as well as a material and social resource that can earn women social respectability, self-esteem and the right to move confidently and freely within their own environment (LaTosky 2010). This is not to say that women with lip-plates necessarily have wealthier husbands or healthier cattle – just as 'rhetoric does not always succeed' (Carrithers 2009) – but that in the grounded experiences and social practices of the Mursi, strength is commonly expressed as providing social and material advantages (LaTosky 2010:171).

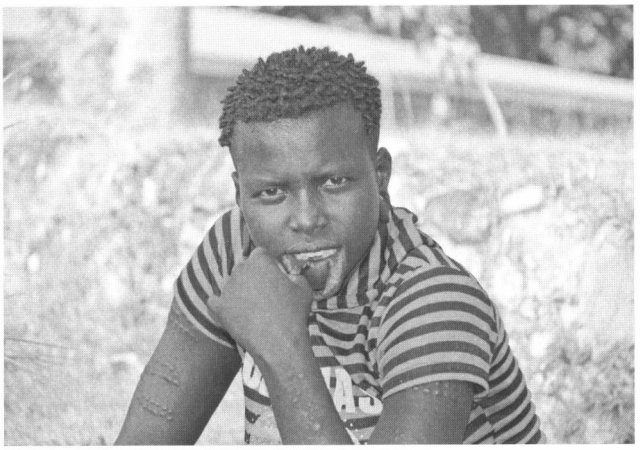

Fig. 5: Ngarora Tulla (2011)

A Mursi girl who chooses to endure the painful procedure of stretching her lip is believed to be 'doing the right thing'. This is not because of the glorification of bodily pain, but because of the social consequences that such physically and emotionally demanding practices can have. A fully stretched lip means that a girl is competent, sexually mature and can walk proudly when she enters her husband's cattle compound or serves his guests food. She will be admired by everyone for everything that the lip-plate symbolises: a sense of beauty, a good disposition, fertility, diligence, commitment and virtuous behaviour. Lip-plates, then, have a double force, for not only is a girl with a lip-plate considered brave and competent, but from the outset she is destined to marry a good man, since the lip-plate is a kind of guarantor of strength. Conceptually, strength is tightly bound with goodness, pride, and well-being (LaTosky 2010:171). As Ngarora

observations, I have noticed that Mursi girls are using these new style markers not only to distinguish themselves from their peers, but also to seek acceptance by outsiders.

Tula (figure 5), a schoolgirl from Jinka, explained, sewing her lip back would run the risk of infection and disfigurement and the fear that she would no longer be beautiful:

> If I sewed my lip back, who [in Mursi] would find this attractive? Remember Ngabio? She sewed her lip back. It was very painful and the surgery was bad. Now her lip looks like this [pulling her lip sideways to indicate that it did not heal well]. She has had many problems. That's why I refuse to sew back mine. Ask Olijerholi [a schoolboy sitting next to her] if a [sewn] lip like this is beautiful. If I go back to Makki, who will find me beautiful [with such a lip]? Even if the government offered me 5000 Birr to sew back my lip,[21] I would tell them 'No way! This is my body! I will not do it!' Nobody can force me to do this! If someone tried to, I am not afraid to die (Ngarora Tula, Jinka, 27 December 2011, recorded conversation).

Mursi women and men still admire the physical beauty and virtues of strength and competence associated with the lip-plate, despite external pressures to ban the practice. This is evident in the rhetorical prescription that a man should marry a woman with a lip-plate, as expressed by the taunts he will receive from his age-mates if he fails to do so. Olitula Sabakoro, a young Mursi man from Makki, explained his own experience of this:

> My first wife did not have a lip-plate so my friends would tease me, and this really upset my stomach. I always told you that I would eventually marry a girl with a lip-plate, and now I have.[22] Her name is Ngatuaholi. She is tall and has a beautiful lip-plate out to here [stretching his arms in front of him as he would to indicate the shaped horns of a bull]. Eeh, now my stomach is cool and my friends have stopped bothering me (Olitula Sabakoro, Mako, 20 April 2009, recorded conversation).

Although today many Mursi girls, especially schoolgirls, are experimenting with new looks, including growing their hair or choosing not to wear lip-plates, it is also expected that when they finish school, they will go back to looking and behaving like Mursi.[23] From my observations, however, it is unlikely that girls, especially those who attend boarding schools outside Mursiland, will continue with the practice of wearing lip-plates. One Mursi student explained that peer pressure and government pressure are the two main reasons why girls are abandoning the practice:

> There are only two of us at school with stretched lips. We are constantly told by others to sew up our lips. Today, we are told that if we pierce girls' lips, both the woman doing the piercing and the girls will be thrown in jail. We are also told that we should sew up our earlobes and lips and wear only gold [earrings]. The government wants us to look like *kochumbai*. They don't like the way we look. They want us to change, but this is not a good

21 5000 ETB are approximately equivalent to 300 USD.

22 The Mursi are polygamous. A wealthy man will have up to five or six wives.

23 The Mursi usually shave their heads, making decorative designs with razor blades.

> way. What do we get in return? Nothing! At least a lip-plate can bring a salary for women – tourists like our lip-plates! Will the government pay us a salary if we sew up our lips? No! Mursi girls should be able to choose to pierce or not to pierce their lips (Ngalu Tula, Jinka, 27 December 2011, recorded conversation).

Many Mursi see lip-plates as a way to earn a small income from tourists, especially girls and women who wear or sell them. One lip-plate is sold for approximately 20 ETB (ca. 1 USD), and every photo fetches roughly 3 ETB (ca. 20 cents).

Concluding remarks

One of the truths obfuscated by exotic images of Mursi women is the extent to which women's bodies are being controlled. A troubling example of this is found in campaigns in southern Ethiopia to eliminate so-called harmful traditional practices such as wearing lip-plates. As practices aimed at adorning, beautifying and modifying women's (and increasingly men's) bodies become normalised in the West, and this includes everything from labreitifry (i.e. wearing labrets) to labiaplasty (i.e. labial surgery), the elimination of lip-plates (and ear-plates) among the Mursi in southern Ethiopia remains ambiguous.[24] Martha Nussbaum, however, provides a likely rationale for understanding why habits such as the wearing of lip-plates are being singled out as posing a risk of self-harm, namely, disgust and shame (2004:339; cf. LaTosky 2006). As Nussbaum explains, 'there are types of "self-harm" that are only called that because of phobic reactions based on disgust and shame' and 'without the backing of such emotions the claim of harm falls to the ground' (2004:338). This applies in particular to government agencies and NGOs, as well as to non-Mursi in the more urban areas that shame the Mursi into believing that lip-plates are a form of self-harm. As one Mursi elder exclaimed:

> The reason we are being told to stop piercing our lips and ears is because the people from the towns don't like it. They tell us it's bad! But the Bodi man is right when he says: 'If the *kochumbai* are allowed to cut their penises, then our girls should be allowed to pierce their lips!' (Bio-i-tungia Komoru, Jinka, 31 October 2011, recorded interview)

The elimination of harmful traditional practices in southern Ethiopia, especially the lip-plates worn by Mursi women, appears more like a paternalistic prohibition than an example of gender justice and equality. This paternalism stems from UN policies to encourage human rights, especially the rights of women and children, and cultural rights, but which, on the other hand, do not fully take into consideration the experiences and multiple views of girls and women in Mursi and South Omo in general. In this paper

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24 The same also applies to Suri women who live to the west of the Mursi and wear large pottery lip-plates, as well as to Bodi women who wear small wooden lip-plugs.

I have suggested that more credible evidence should be provided before the practice of piercing and stretching one's bottom lip is labelled as harmful, especially since no such evidence can be found in the stories and experiences of Mursi women and men themselves. For Mursi women today, the perceived risk of piercing one's lip (or ears) has to do less with health issues than with fears of imprisonment, which, at the time of writing, were circulating throughout Mursiland.[25] The harm is thus not in the act of wearing lip-plates, but rather in the way in which Mursi women are being made hostage to a universal rights-based discourse that does not include their own voices and lived experiences. One of the practical implications of this paper thus lies in my suggestion to broaden the dialogue on 'harmful traditional practices' in South Omo, which has yet to reflect critically on different definitions and understandings of self-harm from the perspectives of those engaging in or encouraging such practices. This can only be made possible if policy-makers begin to listen to those most affected by the eradication of HTPs, namely girls and women. It should be asked how they perceive the mechanisms by which the international community, the Ethiopian state, NGOs and individuals are imposing their will on the bodies of women in South Omo and how women are experiencing and, in some cases, resisting such impositions. Thus Ngarora Tula disagrees that she should have to sew back her bottom lip in order to go to school, while others, like Ngadhôle Dhedhep, argue that by sewing up her bottom lip, but not her stretched earlobes, she will be accepted by outsiders, yet still be identified as 'Mursi'. These are choices that Mursi girls and women are making and should be able to continue to make for themselves in the future.

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[25] Further research is needed in order to determine the extent to which such fears of imprisonment are in fact linked to Article 569 of the Ethiopian Criminal Code, which states that participation in harmful traditional practices 'are punishable with imprisonment not exceeding three months or a fine not exceeding Birr 500 [ca. 45 USD]' (see Haile Gabriel 2010: 6).

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