

## David Turton (1940-2023)

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One of the first anthropologists to work in lowland Ethiopia, David Turton drew attention to peoples on the periphery and the effects on them of state and capitalist projects – notably wildlife conservation and the building of large dams. He engaged in public anthropology, feeling a duty to serve as an advocate for people whom he knew first as research participants but whom he later became friends with and whom he viewed as kindred spirits. Just four months before he died, at the age of 83, he travelled back to Ethiopia to renew friendships with people he had known for more than fifty years.

David was born in London in 1940. His father was a shipping agent at the London Docks and his mother a school secretary. At 18, not having the necessary O-Levels to attend university, he undertook preparatory work at a Catholic seminary. He was selected to attend the English College in Rome, where he spent three years completing his Lic. Phil. *cum laude* at the Pontifical Gregorian University. Unsure of his calling, he returned to England in 1963 having secured a rare agreement to be readmitted should he have a change of heart. He completed his missing O-Levels and went to the London School of Economics in 1964 to do a BSc in sociology, where he met his future wife, Pat. They were assigned as tutor partners for the optional course they both chose in social anthropology.

David went on to complete a PhD in social anthropology at the LSE under the supervision of James Woodburn, a specialist on African hunter-gatherers. Interested in going to Ethiopia, David read the work of the 19<sup>th</sup> century explorer Vittorio Bottego and was struck by a description of hunter-gatherers living on the banks of the River Omo. They were the Kwegu, and they lived in close relation to a larger group, the Mursi. In the dry season of 1968, he negotiated with the Mursi to pitch his tent beside the Omo, where they were cultivating sorghum. He stayed by the Omo, slowly learning their language, until the time came for the Mursi to leave for their cattle camps. By this time, he had learned enough of the language and gained sufficient trust to be allowed to join them on the journey to the cattle camps.

Living and traveling with the Mursi helped David see that their way of life was threefold, involving flood-retreat cultivation along the Omo and Mago rivers, cattle herding, and shifting rain-fed cultivation. None of these strategies on its own was sufficient but in combination they provided a livelihood. The Mursi likened these activities to the three hearth-stones that support their cooking pots, all three being vital for their well-being. David's recognition of these patterns – as described in his 1973 doctoral thesis – led to a deeper appreciation of a culture that most outsiders had hitherto misunderstood and stereotyped as purely pastoralist.

David took up a lectureship at Manchester University in 1971, and continued to carry out fieldwork among the Mursi, initially focusing on political oratory. The Mursi used public debates to reach collective decisions, particularly at times of crisis. Perennial concerns included conflict with neighbouring groups and territorial encroachment by wildlife reserves. As well as the Omo National Park, the Mursi were significantly affected by the establishment of the Mago National Park in 1978, which incorporated the majority of Mursiland. These tensions formed the backdrop to six ethnographic films that David made with director Leslie Woodhead between 1974 and 2001. In 1987, inspired by his friend and former student Dan

Marks, David established the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester.

Although he strongly identified as an anthropologist, David did not define himself by his job. He was grateful that he had the opportunity to be do what he loved and believed to be meaningful, and to be led by his curiosity. It was in this spirit that he took early retirement from Manchester University in 1990 to have more time to pursue his fieldwork and other interests. He often joked that after his retirement he had “never been busier!”

Through the 1980s and 1990s David served on committees for Oxfam, the Windle Trust, and various professional associations; he also served as editor of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (1983-86) and the journal *Disasters* (1989-95). In 1996, he became director of the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University, where he had a transformative impact – leading the expansion of its summer school and establishing its Master’s programme.

In the early 2000s David was galvanised into a new phase of activity as plans were announced for the building of the Gibe III dam on the Omo. He scoured reports of engineers and hydrologists to appraise the implications of the dam and associated sugar plantations for the peoples of the region. In an address at SOAS in 2010, he skewered the studies carried out by the dam’s backers and laid out the consequences of disrupting the Omo’s annual flood for the 100,000 people living downstream. Of the three “hearth-stones” on which local people depended, the flood was the most important. If the project proceeded as planned, it would undermine the entire subsistence economy.

David was not opposed to the dam itself. Rather, his concern was that the costs and benefits of the project were unfairly distributed. No compensation was offered to the Mursi and their neighbours, either for the loss of the flood or for lands seized for plantations. In contrast to the open debates practiced by the Mursi, the government announced its plan as a *fait accompli* with scant efforts made to consult “project-affected people”. The Mursi referred to the architects of the project as “people who keep their mouths shut”. Refusing to stay quiet himself, David penned op-eds and supported all those calling for justice. Given a choice between gentle backchannel pressure or shouting injustice from the rooftops, David was unequivocal: “I’m with the shouters”.

In practice, David rarely raised his voice. His words were always measured and imbued with sympathy for the marginalised. As a scholar and as a person he was unfailingly generous. David and Pat’s home served as a meeting-place for scholars and practitioners, and many formative conversations were held on their couch and around their dinner table. His legacies include the Omo-Turkana Research Network, an international consortium of social and environmental scientists focused on the region, and Mursi Online, which continues to publicise the challenges faced by the peoples of the Lower Omo Valley.

He is survived by his wife Pat, son Danny, daughter-in-law Lisa, and two grandsons, Zed and Asa.

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