



FOREWORD

The Politics of Beauty

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Translated by Andrea Davoust

Anthropology has long had trouble with groups that developed their political institutions outside the state. Indeed, the state remains this field's default horizon. For evolutionary anthropology of the distant past, the state was an embryonic destiny. Its absence first distinguished – ahead of time – the meagre accomplishments of those who failed to invent it. Later on, it became an unavoidable, burdensome neighbour to be accommodated by compromising, and these concessions in turn left their mark on those who could not afford to ignore it. And even when the 'Savages' were able to fend it off, as Pierre Clastres wished, the state remained a monstrous appendix whose coming 'society' as a whole strived to prevent, armed with mysterious foresight.

Ever and always, the state remained the hallmark of categorizations through which to study those who do without it. Jean-Baptiste Eczet's great merit in addressing this question is that he takes a step back. This initially appears puzzling, since it amounts to demonstrating that the East African pastoral populations of which he is one of the rare French experts aesthetically express political institutions, thus incorporating them in a metonymic fashion.

Eczet's paradoxical proposals aim neither to charm nor to shock. Indeed, like any innovative anthropologist, he amplifies and develops in conceptual terms the inspiration he drew from the Mursi people of southern Ethiopia's Omo valley, whose life he shared for more than a year. These ferociously egalitarian cattle herders cultivate a warrior ethos and have long remained on the sidelines of the national state. They are a shining example of the way in which aesthetics plays a pivotal role in social and political life, and offer a medium to express, by discussing beauty and seeking its expression, the basis of collective life and rules for living together. Anthropological research on East African pastoral societies had up to this point focused either on the ecological and symbolic aspects of what has been called the 'cattle complex' since Melville Herskovits coined the term, or on the internal workings of segmentary political systems based on a hierarchy of age sets. In the former case, analysis centred on the herders' emotional inclination towards their cows; this investment in their herds was depicted as bordering on pathological passion, removed from any economic rationality, while the study never really questioned the reasons for the bond and identification between humans and animals. In the latter case, the political organization was described using as a starting point the systematic division into groups defined by their age – there are six such age sets for Mursi males – while ignoring the fact that these visible age sets are operative only at certain times, and alongside, or in alternation with, other circumstantial forms of social mobilization based on geographical closeness, territorial divisions or kinship. By emphasizing the aesthetic forms of personal construction – corporal adornments, onomastics and poetic art – Eczet proposes an alternative, processual vision of Mursi sociality and sheds new light on the institutions through which pastoral societies of the Nilotic area were traditionally described.

With his vivid writing and superb, respectful photos, Eczet shows us how adornments, both those of humans and cattle, are links connecting various situations of interactions with archetypes and recurring aspects of social life: ritual practices, homicides, marital relations, ties with the dead, etc. Mursi bodies, enhanced with headdresses, jewels, armbands, bracelets, lip-plates, ear discs, paintings and scarifications thus become the continuously recomposed clues to intentional attitudes that help define and maintain relations with humans and nonhumans. It is also the case with naming practices, which are essentially visual phenomena, as are the images projected by bodies: while the first name given to a Mursi refers to the quality of the colour he or she shares with the bull he or she is associated with at birth, the dozens, if not hundreds, of names

that will be subsequently given according to his or her interactions with others are a source of variations – metonymic and metaphoric – on this initial colour-based identity.

Via the incorporated forms they show and the names bestowed upon them, individuals develop social identities that place them in increasingly distinctive positions within the network of relations with other human beings, as well as with particular places and a whole range of nonhumans – cattle, spirits, the dead, etc. Eczet's subtle analysis of the wide range of interactions between men, women and herd leads him to reinterpret the 'cattle complex'. In his work, the way in which these relations change depending on the context is ultimately based on the plasticity of uses that can be assigned to cattle – at times meat reserve, at times exchange value and at times mirror or foil. He thus establishes that the assignment of individual status according to age sets in fact results from a gradual deployment of personal identity rather than from a pre-established setting, since the system of category-based classification becomes conspicuous only in very peculiar circumstances that require the complexities of Mursi sociality to be reduced and simplified. For Mursi herders have favoured mobility and temporary links over ties with a territory or lineages, the constant re-creation of their togetherness in agonistic assemblies over clearly defined obligations between set social categories; as a result, individual abilities, bodies and bovine partners are magnified.

This gives an idea of how crucial it is to study this sort of pastoral democracy, entirely contained in corporal practices defined by constant movement, a frugal material culture, adornment, the mastery of oratorical art and the inclusion of bovine partners in social life, in order to contemplate new, non-Eurocentric forms of democracy that have developed on the peripheries of states. For poetry, temporary or permanent body decorations, dance, persuasion rhetorics, and colour as typological tool are not institutions in the ordinary sense – that is, settings within which human actors take actions. All of the above are instituting frameworks that offer interaction scripts and images of the group through which to stage many possible situations of agreement or disagreement. Evidently, the term 'politics' here does not refer to power relations or the art of expressing a collective will. Rather, it is defined as a way of creating unprecedented situations by bringing together things that, at first glance, do not belong to the same pragmatic or ontological categories: humans and cows, obsessive egalitarianism and the free use of violence, poetry and the internalized belonging to an age group. Here lies the power of this book on political anthropology. This field has enjoyed a strong

renewal, boosted by young researchers such as Jean-Baptiste Eczet, by giving up transposing to the rest of the world the concepts and categories through which the West has objectified its historical path.

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