

## **7. Ethnic Tourism as Alternative Development in the Lower Omo Valley, Ethiopia**

**Nishizaki Nobuko**

### **Abstract**

Sub-Saharan Africa comprises one of the fastest growing tourism markets in the world. Many contemporary state agencies in Sub-Saharan African regard tourism as a major opportunity for economic development. Since the mid-2000s, the Ethiopian federal government has promoted tourism and developed infrastructure facilities and services for well-managed tourism that offers thousands of enticing experiences and a safe stay for foreign tourists, as well as job opportunities for the local communities. As a result, ethnic tourism in the southern Ethiopia is growing rapidly.

The federal government has implemented massive regional development measures related to conservation, agriculture and tourism in the Lower Omo Valley. In the case of southwestern Ethiopia, several parcels of land that were traditionally used by the local population were converted into agricultural land. Ethnic tourism is another form of development that has grown rapidly in recent years. The body ornamentation and painting of the agro-pastoralists in the lowlands are popular among foreign tourists. Western and Asian tourists have also helped draw international attention to traditional lifestyles of local people and the region's 'untouched' wilderness. As the government considers pastoralism as a backward, uneconomic and devoid of modern development components, it recommended the transition from a pastoral lifestyle to one based on modern agriculture.

This paper discusses the impact of tourism on ethnic minorities in the area by analysing their livelihoods and attitude towards tourists. Then, it investigates whether tourism is effective in benefiting local people as an alternative development. This study also considers the meaning of 'community-based' initiatives in ethnic tourism.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Tourism, Traditional Culture, Sustainability, Development, Community-based Alternative; Heritage Tourism.

## 1. Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the fastest growing tourism markets in the world. Many contemporary state agencies in Sub-Saharan African regard tourism as a major opportunity for economic development. In most developing countries, tourism is expected to contribute to reducing poverty, creating job opportunities and preserving an area's environment (Christie *et al.* 2014); thus, government agencies, local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), development planners and the business sector have planned most development strategies. Conversely, unbalanced power relations and the distribution of economic interests occur easily at tourist sites in developing countries (Urry 1990), so that the alternative tourism such as sustainable tourism, responsible tourism and pro-poor tourism are expected to correct these negative aspects (Goodwin 2011; Buckley 2012).

From the mid-2000s, the Ethiopian federal government has also promoted tourism, aiming to acquire further foreign exchange and developing infrastructure facilities and services for well-managed tourism that offers thousands of enticing experiences and a safe stay for foreign tourists, and job opportunities for local communities in rural areas. Consequently, the federal government is urging a large number of tourists to visit some of the country's most remote areas (WTTC 2017). Historical sites in the north and ethnic tourism in the southwest are proliferating, with safaris remaining weak in low numbers due to lack of diversity of wildlife.

In south-eastern Ethiopia, classical, ethnic tourism is popular among foreign tourists, unlike alternative tourism or tourism development, which is expected to be a 'panacea' (Cornelissen and Junko 2018; Nobuko 2019). The Ethiopian federal government has viewed tourism in the area negatively, and the unequal relationship between guests and hosts has been criticised (Turton 2004; LaTosky 2014). However, the hosts have positively accepted guests regardless of the outsider's critical view. This paper discusses the impact of tourism on ethnic minorities in the area by analysing their livelihoods and attitudes

towards tourists. It then investigates whether tourism is effective in benefiting local people as an alternative development mechanism.

## 2. Research Area and Method

Ethnic tourism is particularly prevalent in the South Omo Zone in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) (Fig. 1). This area is famous as a UNESCO's world cultural heritage site. I focus on the Mursi people, who are the most known among foreign tourists, and the Ari people who entered the tourism business recently. The field survey was conducted in and around Jinka town in the centre of the South Omo Zone for three weeks each in January 2013, February 2014, February 2015, September 2016 and September 2018. Jinka town is located at an altitude of 1,400 metre. The average temperature is 21° C, and rainfall is about 1,200 mm per year. The rainy season lasts from April to May and again from October to November.

## 3. Development of Ethnic Tourism

### 3.1 Regional Development

The south-western part of Ethiopia is frequently subject to political intervention by the ethnic groups operating from the northern

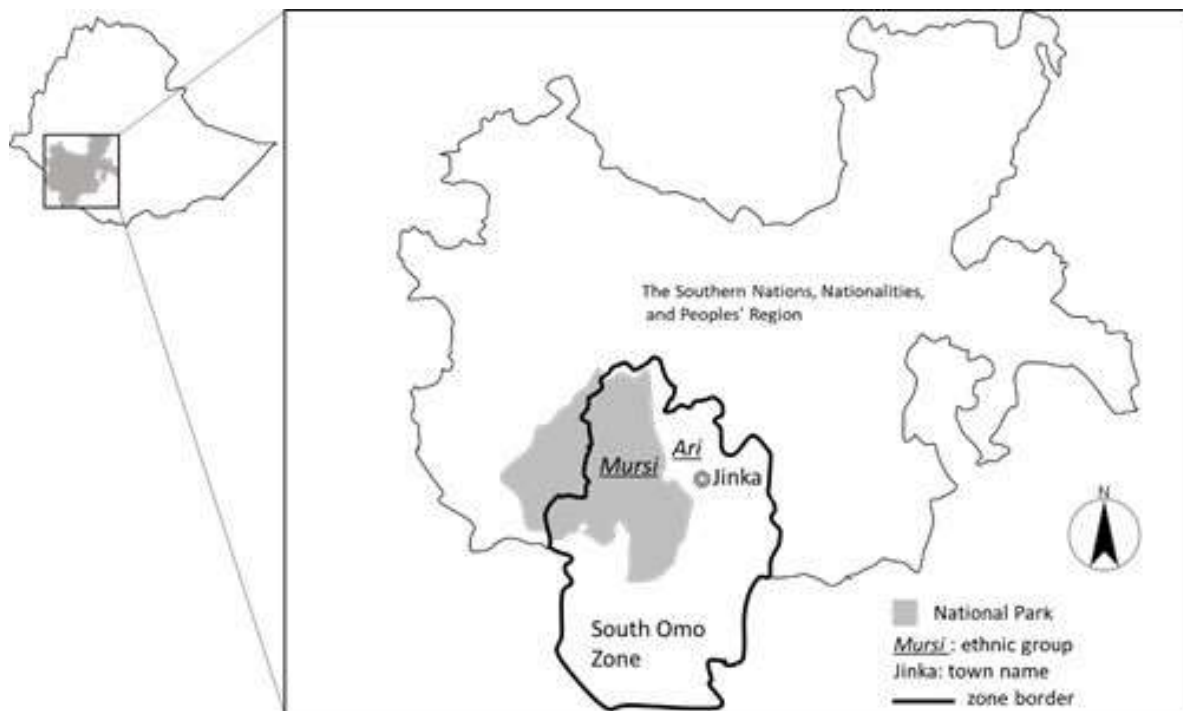


Fig. 1. Research Area (Source : author)

part of the country. Large-scale development projects, however, were not executed until the 2000s. Because of their distance from the centre, they have been marginalised for a long time. In East African countries, the establishment of wildlife-protected areas attracted safari tourists, whereas roads and accommodation facilities were not well developed in the area. Only a very few backpackers and photographers visited these sites, and both safari and ethnic tourism remained sluggish.

Regional development changed suddenly in the 2000s. Several parcels of land traditionally used by the agro-pastoralists were converted into large-scale commercial plantations. Ethnic tourism is another form of development that has proliferated in recent years. In the 2000s, a trunk road connecting the capital city and the town of Jinka was constructed, as were transport roads for plantations, and several new accommodations in the town. This improved infrastructure enabled the area to become a major tourist destination, and the number of tourists in the South Omo Zone, which numbered 3,879 in 2004 increased sharply to 33,100 in 2013 (South Omo Zone Tourism and Cultural Office 2013). Tourists frequently come from European countries such as Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom, followed by the United States, Israel, Scandinavia and others. Additionally, tourists from Asian countries such as Japan, China, South Korea and diaspora tourists have been increasing in recent years.

### *3.2. The Government's View on Ethnic Tourism*

The 'tribal south' is a symbolic phrase used by tour operators to explain this area's ethnic tourism. Some guidebooks emphasise the area's 'wilderness', 'primitiveness' and 'original culture' by focusing on the agro-pastoral society, and the majority of international tourists expect to encounter an 'unchanged' culture. The body ornamentation and painting of the agro-pastoralists in the lowlands are popular among foreign tourists. Western and Asian tourists have also helped draw international attention to traditional lifestyles of local people and the region's 'untouched' wilderness. However, the Ethiopian federal government has mixed feelings about this rapid increase in the number of tourists. In Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's speech on the 13th

‘Pastoral Day’ held on 25 January 2011, in Jinka, tourism in the area was mentioned.<sup>1</sup>

...There are some people who say they are concerned for the pastoralists, but really they want the pastoralists and their lifestyle to remain as a tourist attraction forever. The pastoralists don’t want to live as a tourist attraction. They want a stable, improved life. Taking this into consideration we should ignore the false propaganda of people who want pastoralists to be a tourist attraction. We are standing strongly by the idea of creating opportunities for pastoralists to live securely according to their own interests. Providing the necessary support will be the key feature of our development work in pastoralist areas....

The Ethiopian federal government views pastoralism as backward, uneconomical and in need of modern development. So the government recommended the transition of the pastoral lifestyle to modern agriculture. They also considered grazing land used by agro-pastoralists as under-utilised ‘no man’s land’ and converted it into commercial agricultural land invested in by the government or private companies. The government believes escaping traditional livestock livelihoods will lead to regional development and says it will not tolerate the portrayal of its residents as living in ‘undeveloped’ areas to satisfy tourists’ expectations. Therefore, the Ethiopian government does not enthusiastically participate in its tourism projects, including community-based tourism (CBT) as a local alternative tourism. Contrary to government’s intention, however, many tourists were interested in ‘traditional’ pastoral society. How do the tourists consume traditional culture?

### **3.3. The Mursi’s Tourism**

Tourists will travel around the South Omo area for four to seven days, coinciding with the local market day and the distinctive features of each ethnic group. Most tourists visit several settlements

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1. You can read the manuscript in English. Url: <http://www.mursi.org/pdf/Meles%20Jinka%20speech.pdf>, accessed May 2019.

to take pictures of the local communities. ‘Traditional culture’ and the lifestyle of agro-pastoralists interest them the most. Even though there are some differences between ethnic groups, the tour style has been standardised, such as the entry fee, which has been set from 100 to 500 birr<sup>2</sup> per group in recent years. The Mursi people, with a population of about 7,000, are the most popular agro-pastoral society among tourists. Their main livelihoods involve grazing livestock and the cultivation of sorghum. Their society is highly mobile (Turton 1978).

Tourism has changed since the state-owned sugarcane plantation, about 240,000 hectares large, began operations in 2011. Consequently, the area the Mursi traditionally used for grazing livestock has been getting smaller. All-weather roads are maintained, and the guests visit the tourist villages on a half-day trip from Jinka town regardless of the season. Guests have to take a local guide from the Jinka Guide Association, and each group pays a guide fee of 200 birr to the association.

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2. 100 *birr* = 4 USD.



*Fig. 2. The tourist village (Source : author)*



*Fig. 3. Mursi women with decorated headdress  
(Source : author)*

At the village, the guide first explains the social structure, culture, rituals and so on (Fig. 2). The traditional lifestyle of the Mursi is their main topic, but contemporary problems such as plantation operations, which people consider a problem is never explained. In general, performances such as songs and dances that are common in African ethnic tourism are not conducted. Tourists take pictures as soon as the guide's explanation finishes. The tourists decide the targets of their cameras, and the Mursi request them strenuously by shouting 'photo, photo' to gain attention. If the tourists do not hear their voice, they persistently call out

by touching their bodies. Women with lip plates and men with decorated bodies have long attracted many tourists, but they are changing their appeal to the tourists to attract tourists' attention by making excessive decorations on the body, heads or posing (Fig. 3). Tourists try to take as many good pictures as possible, and the Mursi are expecting to take as much payment as possible. Some Mursi stand by themselves behind other people taking their picture and earn as much as possible. The tourist raises his voice to 'move' and the man replies, 'pay money for taking photos'. It is clamorous in the village during the tourists' stay for about 30 minutes only, and the village returns to a quiet space as usual after the tourists leave. The Mursi remove all the body decorations, and start grazing, collecting firewood, cooking and eating.

The entrance fee is 200 birr per group, which is paid to the chief of each settlement, and the photography fee is transferred between individuals in cash. Each tourist pays the cost on the spot immediately after taking photographs of an individual. The basic cost per person is 5 birr, and, if infants accompany women, 5 birr will be added. Fees are

used at the time of unexpected situations such as a sudden illness in the settlement. As for individual earnings, men with the most income in the high season make 150 birr per day and 20 birr in the low season, going by interviews with 20 people in 2017. Since guests visit the settlement almost every day in the high season, this is a substantial individual income and quite different from the case of Samburu tourism in Kenya (Nakamura 2017), where local people have an insignificant income. There are three reasons for substantial income. First, profit from photography belongs to individuals; second, the small number of tourist villages has not produced competition yet; third, tourists are most interested in visiting the Mursi village as a wildlife viewing tour. They use the money for drinking alcohol and purchasing daily products and food. However, there are differences in pay between individuals, and the number of tourists differs according to the season. Political instability in September 2016 has dramatically affected tourism in the area. For the Mursi to secure a livelihood, it is prudent for them to maintain livestock, farming or take side jobs in the local tourism industry.

The federal government has explained that a series of development projects would provide employment opportunities for the Mursi and technology would be used to transition to modern agriculture. However, the Mursi have lost a wide range of pastoral lands and have gained only poor job opportunities, for example, as a security guard hired temporarily at a plantation. The salary is poor, and the Mursi cannot acquire the kind of job they want. Even if they want to move elsewhere, they cannot find pastureland because of a national park established during the socialist regime, where illegal grazing is strictly prohibited. Meanwhile, the tourism industry gives the Mursi an indispensable source of cash income.

In an interview with the guests, some made statements like ‘I succeeded in taking the best pictures’ (*Japanese tourist*, 8 February 2014), ‘Mursi talk only two words; money and photo, so I was disappointed’ (*Spanish tourist*, 6 September 2016). In addition to expectations for sightseeing, guests reinforce the stereotypes based on a ‘disappointing experience’ while satisfying their desire for pictures



and distributing them by SNS globally. The guide explains the society and culture, but often gives stereotypical explanations of an ‘isolated nomadic tribe’. Their emphasis is on static, ‘traditional’ cultures. The Mursi in the tourist village serve as good models to bring in cash without the need for guides providing any explanations of their culture. The guides neither confirm nor deny positive outsider explanations, and never mention critical issues that they face today.

### *3.4. Local Guides in Ethnic Tourism*

In recent years, guides are playing significant roles in interpreting traditional culture for the tourists, and the government has focused on increasing the number of qualified guides to support the establishment of guide associations in rural areas. The first local guide organisations in the South Omo Zone were established in 2005. These were New Vision and Pioneer, based in Jinka town. The two organisations were integrated in 2014 and became the Jinka Town Guide Association, encompassing 26 guides in it.

Most members of the associations are young men in their twenties. Ethnic minorities in the area are an Ari man who joined the association in 2015, while others are from different ethnic backgrounds. Most of these guides have not received expert training in tourism; however, as a new trend, three guides with a degree in tourism participated in the association. Most guides take tourists to the Mursi settlement. Guides are in charge of rotations among 26 members; therefore, the opportunity for a guide to work is once or twice a week in the low season and almost every day in the high season. A guide will receive 100 to 200 birr per month in the low season and 1,000 to 2,000 birr per month during the high season. They are aware of the instability of the tourism industry; therefore, they usually have other jobs such as a small Bajaji (small three-wheeled taxis) driver.

## **4. The Ari’s Tourism**

### *4.1. Guide Association*

The Ari people, whose ‘traditional’ culture is not represented in the agro-pastoral sector, have recently become involved in the ethnic tourism industry. Ari society has the largest population in the South Omo Zone, and they live in the lowlands, being largely dependent

on agricultural activities. They cultivate ensete (*Ensete ventricosum*, commonly known as ‘false banana’, the area’s most important root crop), taro, yams, maize, barley, wheat, teff (*Eragrostis tef*) and other crops. They are also engaged in raising livestock, honey collection and hunting. Ari settlements did not become major tourist destinations until the number of tourists visiting remote Mursi villages dramatically increased. Tourism companies and the Jinka Town Guide Association began to find new tourism destinations in the Jinka town.

Village K (population of about 3,500) has witnessed the most active tourist activity. Initially, Ari’s 10 young men established and organised a guide association called the NegeSewi<sup>3</sup> Local Guide Association in 2010. All 10 guides graduated from the same high school, and currently attend the same Protestant church.

#### *4.2. Everyday Life as a Tourism Commodity*

Guests staying in Jinka town can easily visit village K. First, they pay the entrance fee of 250 birr per person to the guide association. The price includes a guide fee for village walks, which take about 30 minutes. There is no additional fee for taking pictures, nor do they directly exchange cash between guests and hosts. In agro-pastoral settlements, tourists spend most of their time taking pictures, but everyday life is treated as a tourist resource in Ari villages. Tourists walk through the village within about 0.5 near the association’s office with a local Ari guide, who tells them the names and the characteristics of local foods such as bananas, mangos, grains, ensete, yams, pumpkins, cassavas and some local spices. Tourists are invited to attempt cooking local foods and taste them onsite. The guide also explains how the local beer is brewed, and the tourists are given some alcohol to taste if they wish. The village’s main attraction is an artisanal workplace where tourists can watch professional blacksmiths and potters at work. Usually, pottery is women’s work to be sold in the local market (Fig. 4). Men sometimes help to collect clay and mostly engage in agriculture. Blacksmiths are men, and they show their work with the guide’s interpretation, but don’t sell any products. Dancing and singing performances are only offered during the harvest season when the locals dance.

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3. This means ‘tomorrow’s person’ in Amharic.



*Fig. 4. Ari pottery work place of pottery's woman (Source : author)*

The Ari's guides participate in almost every phase of tourism encounters such as by arranging a tour with tour companies, collecting the entrance fee in the office and paying villagers who provide service for the tourists. Each guide has his own preferred tour route and chooses which sites will be seen. The guide negotiates with several villagers in advance to accept guests because local food and beer are prepared in advance, and they offer basic explanations about Ari's society and culture, responding to guests' questions at any time as with the Mursi tourism.

The government of Ethiopia and guests have a common view in recognising the local society as an 'unchanged culture'. The Ari recognise everyday life as a tourist resource and try to represent this in the village as different from that of agro-pastoralists. They emphasise their rich agricultural landscapes using their own interpretations. Some tourists have been satisfied with their hospitality and easy billing. Others stated, 'we were extremely disappointed when they were wearing the same clothes as us'. There are some gaps between the hosts' lifestyles

and the guests' expectations that the area will be 'backward'. However, this gap makes village tourism more valuable and provides additional tourist destinations.

### 4.3. Income from tourism

There are a large number of tourists from the end of September to March compared to the rest of the year. This is the high season for tourism, and it corresponds with the agricultural off-season. So the guides effectively balance the agricultural and tourist seasons. The number of tourists from 2013 to 2014 was 1,904, and the income was about 476,000 birr (Fig. 5). The largest number of guests was in November and December, with 380 guests (76 pairs) visiting the place. The village walk is conducted over an area of about 0.5 km<sup>2</sup> near the association office, and the people involved include potters, blacksmiths and women who cook local food. Special skills are not required to cook local food or to brew local beer, so every woman visitor can participate in this. The Ari mainly perceive tourism as a source of cash, and half the entrance fee is divided among those who are involved in the tour. The other half is saved for the future. Presently, the villagers are closely connected with the guides and considerably benefit from

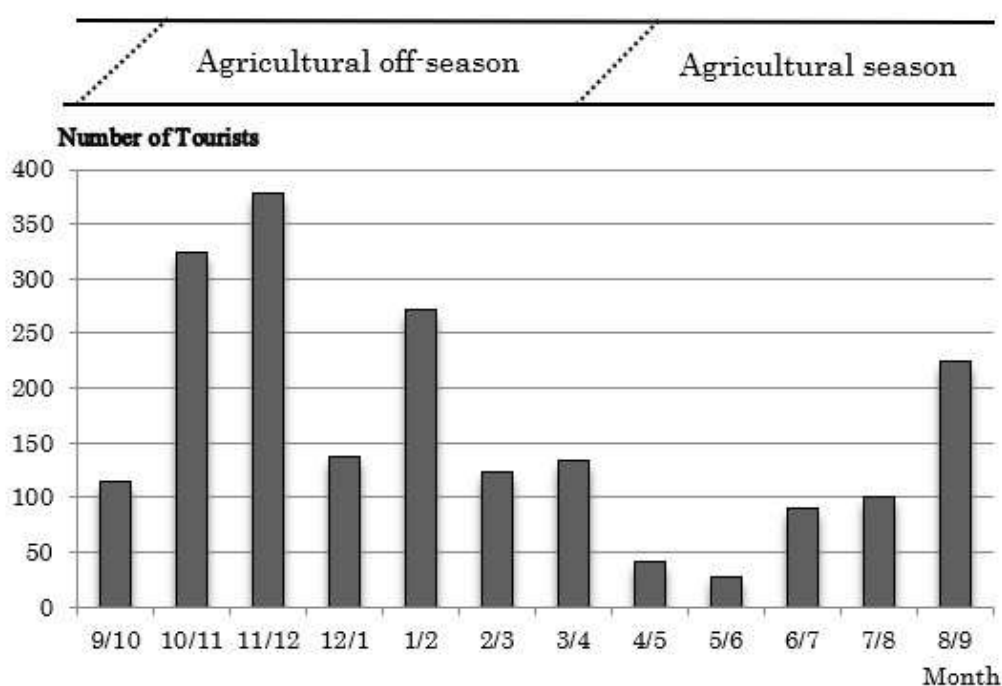


Fig. 5. The number of Tourists in Ari's village K from 2013 to 2014  
(Source : Village K's Guide Association)

them economically. In an interview with an Ari guide in January 2015, I was told that they are delighted to have a chance to be engaged in tourism, because it is estimated that each guide earns about 1,000 to 5,000 birr per month in the highest tour season.

Tourism is an extension of the villagers' daily lives. People are somewhat involved in the tourism business, but they spend most of their time on agriculture, blacksmithing and making pottery. Nobody is thinking about devoting themselves entirely to the tourism business. The locals have not even tried making souvenirs. Since visiting an Ari village is still a new phenomenon in the area, it is not yet a highly competitive business. Therefore, the business of guiding, which requires only a small investment, can provide a new means of subsistence and is an attractive occupation, especially for young people.

## **5. Summary and Discussion**

With large-scale government-led development programs, a major destination promoting mass tourism was newly formed in the south-western part of Ethiopia. African classic ethnic tourism selling 'tradition' has steadily increased the number of tourists to the region. Ethnic tourism in south-western Ethiopia was not initiated by state, enterprises, NGOs or investors; instead, it has been criticised for its premodern style and disregard for human rights, with critics especially targeting the popular Mursi tourism. Regardless of the outsider's 'gaze', the Mursi, the Ari and the guides from different ethnic backgrounds have entered the tourist market without investing to secure the tourist resources currently. They provide an example of a bottom-up tourism initiative.

The Mursi have responded to the needs of sporadically visiting tourists by specialising in body decoration to attract photography. They left irksome explanations in the hands of their town's guides, and they devote themselves exclusively to the subjects of the photograph, using the body as a resource and concentrating on individual payment. The Ari's settlements have recently been recognised as tourist destinations and they have also entered the tourist business. However, major attractions of everyday life are found in rural areas. The Ari's guide association controls tourism with the other villagers' cooperation. All

earn relatively high cash incomes from tourism and control tourism to have a low impact on the community. Here, local people have created space for new economic gains that have resulted in sustained social benefits. Conversely, they regard tourism as an extension of daily life and have not been interested in starting new businesses, such as making souvenirs except for those youths who are actively involved in tourism.

Another point to note is the re-evaluation of 'traditional' culture. In ethnic tourism in other areas, there are some movements to rediscover traditional cultural values and re-evaluate culture and identity (Saarinen 2009; Mitchell and Ashley 2010), while economic interests are emphasised in the Ari and the Mursi cases. Even as the government criticises the area's tourism, the villagers can enter into it on their own accord, and largely control what tourism brings to their community. The third point is that tourism is basically conducted by individuals, not as a 'community-based' effort. The Mursi people mainly personally negotiate with the tourists for payment. Guides with different ethnic backgrounds are essentially separated from the community. The Ari's guides only have to be conscious of the community. However, limited places are used for sightseeing, and this is limited to people who are personally connected to the guide involved in the tourism industry. The easy entry of youth to the industry was a great success in this area. As local people see it, tourism is an uncertain business. If incidents occur or illness breaks out, tourists may easily stop visiting. For the hosts to secure a livelihood, it is judicious for them to take other jobs than tourism and to maintain different livelihood strategies, including farming and keeping livestock. As for sustainable tourism, residents cannot be optimistic about their involvement in the industry currently. The Mursi are a mobile society, and tourist villages move easily other places during emergencies. However, due to sugarcane plantations, they face difficulties in their mobility and have no choice but to rely on tourism. The Mursi control the livelihoods of the guides in Jinka town and even the Ari's tourism who rely on them in the area. For the sustainable ethnic tourism to continue, it will be essential to respect the choice of the local community, keep their autonomy and gain support and deep understandings of guests, yet little attention has been paid to the design of strategies to encourage the hosts' socio-political situation.

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