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ECHI CHRISTINA GABBERT, Lands of the Future Initiative

### **Personalia**

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by Aaron Michael Butts

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Bairu Tafla, Ludwig Gerhardt, Hewan Semon Marye,  
Susanne Hummel, and Alexander Meckelburg

Editorial Team

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## Personalia

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## In memoriam David. A Turton (1940–2023)

ECHI CHRISTINA GABBERT, Lands of the Future Initiative

David Turton opened spaces with his research, his engagement, his teachings, and his relentless fight for justice, peace, and understanding. Spaces to explore, lasting well beyond his passing. He created supportive environments for grounded and

public anthropology, giving a greater meaning to research beyond academic doors. His unnegotiable scientific scrutiny is the kind of scholarship that prevails. His courage prevails. His gentleness prevails. If one had to name one great scholar who stands for exceptional, non-triumphant science, it would be David.

David was born in London in 1940. Before becoming an anthropologist, he graduated with distinction from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Still deciding whether to pursue the path of a Catholic priest, he returned to London and enrolled at the London School of Economics, where he completed a BSc in Sociology. This was also where he met Pat—his future wife and lifelong companion—who enrolled at the same time as a student of social anthropology.

Under the supervision of James Woodburn, David initially planned to do his PhD fieldwork among the Kwegu, a group of hunter-gatherers living at the bank of the Omo River in southwestern Ethiopia. In January 1969, he set up camp to stay with the Kwegu's neighbours, the Mursi (autonym: Mun)—and stayed. Earning the acceptance and friendship of his hosts, he was able to live and move with Mursi families and their livestock and to learn the Mun language over a period of 18 months. In his thesis (1973), David's in-depth descriptions of the Mursi's social and spatial organization—combining animal husbandry with river bank (flood-retreat) and bushbelt (rainfed) agriculture—were among the first scholarly accounts to describe livelihood strategies long practiced by many agro-pastoral groups in the Lower Omo Valley. His descriptions are also relevant today, as agro-pastoralism is still often wrongly attributed to NGO or state-driven development initiatives, rather than being fully acknowledged as a valuable form of indigenous knowledge.

David's accounts of the Mursi's complex socio-cultural organization, including age organization, ritualized negotiation, and mediation skills for managing conflict about shared territories also reveal the Mursi's impressive level of political and economic autonomy and self-regulation. His initial research would form the foundation for his deep understanding of Mursi livelihoods, their cultural self-esteem, and their connection to their land as home. It also grounded David's critical evaluation of changes that had only just begun to reach Mursiland through state encroachment when he first lived there and which he was able observe over the many years and times he returned.

In 1971, David began his lectureship at the University of Manchester. The Anthropology Department, established by Max Gluckman in 1949, had a strong focus on African Studies. With Oromo Studies scholars Paul Baxter and Hector Blackhurst, and David's own research among the Mursi, it also became a unique center for Ethiopian Studies in the UK. One of David's publications during that time was *Warfare Among East African Herders* which he co-edited with Katsuyoshi

Fukui, a classic in peace and conflict studies. David's chapter focused on war and peacemaking as 'two sides of a single coin'.<sup>1</sup>

David's PhD student Alula Pankhurst recalls how students valued his exceptional dedication as a supervisor—someone who really saw them, listened to them, and validated their academic paths. He reflects: 'David was always available for students. One would come out of a session with David feeling validated, enthusiastic, and inspired to pursue ideas, as he always listened carefully and encouraged us to take arguments further—to find key insights beyond and beneath the obvious'.<sup>2</sup>

His mentorship combined academic integrity with a deep sense of care—for his students, colleagues, and especially his Mursi friends in Ethiopia. As they faced conflict, famine, and forced displacement, David stood out as one of the few anthropologists who openly defended their rights and dignity.

During his time in Manchester, and together with director Leslie Woodhead from Granada Television, he began a series of six films about the Mursi, produced between 1974 and 2001. While the earlier films focused on classical themes in political anthropology and intergroup relations, the increasing incorporation of Mursi lives—through the growing encroachment of state realities such as famine, conflict, and the harmful effects of development projects—led him to shift his focus to bring greater visibility to these existential issues for an international audience.

David also initiated the establishment of the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology in 1987, the first of its kind in the UK. In 1990 it hosted the 2nd Film Festival of the Royal Anthropological Institute. As a result, together with Peter Crawford, David edited the volume *Film as Ethnography* in 1992, now considered a classic in Visual Anthropology. He also served as editor of *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (MAN)* (1983–1986).

After David took early retirement from his position in Manchester in 1990, his engagement to improving the lives of forcibly displaced people continued through his directorship of the Refugee Studies Center at the University of Oxford from 1997 to 2001. Under his leadership, the Center established a Master's degree programme that provided a rigorous academic foundation for the study of migration and forced displacement that influenced a whole generation of researchers.

Here, David published works that extended well beyond a local focus on southwestern Ethiopia. He also called on the international academic community—particularly scholars in history and anthropology—to avoid simplistic analyses of

<sup>1</sup> K. Fukui and D. Turton, eds, *Warfare among East African Herders: Papers Presented at the First International Symposium, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, September 1977*, *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 3 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1979), 180.

<sup>2</sup> Conversation with Alula Pankhurst on 13 May 2025.

ethnicity that fuel nationalist ideologies and conflict (1997). Building on his work on the dynamics of conflict and ethnicity, he edited the volumes *War and Ethnicity* (1997) and *Ethnic Federalism in Global Comparison* (2006), and in collaboration with Julia Gonzalez, co-edited three volumes on minorities, ethnic diversity, and migration in Europe (1999, 2000, 2003) while also serving as editor of the journal *Disasters* (1989–1995).

David continued his research with and engagement for the people who had helped him become an anthropologist. Well before the term ‘green grabs’ was coined, he recognized the mechanisms by which the Mursi and their neighbours were excluded from decision-making over the use of their land in conservancy projects starting with the Omo Park in 1966 and the Mago Park in 1978. In 1993, when the Ethiopian wildlife reserves of Näčč Śar and the Omo National Park were to be taken over by African Parks Foundation partly to be financed by the European Development Fund, David exposed the top-down approach of the conservancy programmes. He presented almost grotesque evidence of flawed feasibility studies—a common ailment of international cooperation. David wrote: ‘There could be no better illustration of the way in which policy and planning decisions, having momentous long-term implications for the well-being of people and the natural environment, can be based on assessments and assumptions that bear hardly any relation to the world as it really is’.<sup>3</sup> In 2007 African Parks terminated their involvement in Ethiopia. David critically reflected on the process in his 2011 article ‘Wilderness, Wasteland or Home’.

In the meantime, in fact since 1996, David was also gathering data about a Master plan for southwestern Ethiopia that was unfolding largely unnoticed by the public.

In 2013, David spoke about these plans at a meeting of selected scholars at the Max-Planck-Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Saale), Germany. In his calm voice, he shared detailed information on the large-scale sugarcane projects and the Gibe III Dam in Southwest Ethiopia—well before most of us had a clear understanding of what was unfolding in the context of global land grabs. As rapid development schemes accelerated from 2006 onward, he had closely traced and studied the development plans, even at personal risk as there was little interest in transparency by policy makers, investors, and donors. Again, he warned of the absence of feasibility studies, let alone social or environmental impact assessments—deficiencies that stripped local people of their choices, voices, and rights to land.

<sup>3</sup> D. Turton, *Pastoral Livelihoods in Danger: Cattle Disease, Drought, and Wildlife Conservation in Mursiland, South-Western Ethiopia*, Oxfam Working Paper (Oxford–Dublin: Oxfam, 1995), 35.

To close this information gap, he and his colleague David Anderson from the African Studies Centre at the University of Oxford invited hydrologist Sean Avery to produce a comprehensive study on the development of the Lower Omo Valley. David had published Avery's earlier report on Lake Turkana on the Mursi website. Avery remembers that David approached him with a wave of detailed questions 'unrelenting in his genuine passion for the Mursi of Lower Omo, whose wellbeing he was so concerned about'.<sup>4</sup> The result was an extensive report published in 2012.<sup>5</sup> With the findings of this report and additional meticulously gathered data, David was able to foresee the hardship that lay ahead for people in the Omo River Basin. People he knew and respected as knowledgeable experts of their territories were now being treated as inconvenient obstacles to a high-modernist vision of progress. When he finished his presentation, the room fell completely silent. It was one of those moments when outstanding scholarship speaks with clarity, resonates deeply, tells truth to power, and breaks people's hearts. That day, David also told us that the evidence he had collected was already breaking his.

The meeting laid the foundation for the Lands of the Future Initiative—an international think tank of researchers, policymakers, policy makers, human rights advocates, and pastoralists dedicated to producing rigorous, evidence-based information on land grabs in pastoralist territories.

In 2007 David had launched the website *Mursi online*,<sup>6</sup> an invaluable multimedia site of information about the Mursi and their neighbours that makes extensive sources easily accessible for the public. One section compiled media reports on how donor-supported development projects have caused serious harm to the environment and local populations in Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> Major donors such as the Department for International Development (DFID, UK) and the World Bank had to respond to these failures—either by withdrawing support or, in the case of the World Bank, by adopting a much stricter Environmental and Social Framework (ESF) in 2017. Reflecting on David's vigilance in addressing these issues within broader development agendas, we are reminded that ethical standards require persistent, well-informed advocates, watchdogs, and networks to monitor and

<sup>4</sup> Email from Sean Avery, 19 May 2025.

<sup>5</sup> S. Avery, *Lake Turkana & the Lower Omo: Hydrological Impacts of Major Dam & Irrigation Development*, I: Report, II: Annexes (African Studies Centre, University of Oxford, 2012), <https://www.africanstudies.ox.ac.uk/research-projects/lake-turkana-and-the-lower-omo-hydrological-impacts-of-major-dam-and-irrigation-de>, accessed on 14 June 2025.

<sup>6</sup> *Mursi Online*, <https://www.mursi.org>, accessed on 14 June 2025.

<sup>7</sup> 'Press and Media' in *Mursi Online, Durham University (2006–2025)*, <https://www.mursi.org/change-and-development/press-coverage>, accessed on 14 June 2025.

prevent such violations. Both the Lands of the Future Initiative as well as the Omo-Turkana Research Network (OTuRN) were shaped with his support and enthusiasm.

David dedicated the last decades of his life almost entirely to promoting research about how to prevent the negative impacts of dams and infrastructural development projects, publishing and presenting extensively and using every available channel to bring positive change.<sup>8</sup> Because he was not opposed to development projects per se, he reached out to policy makers with detailed proposals to seek constructive collaboration. While he gained access into political arenas due to his scientific reputation, he also was seen as a messenger of uncomfortable truths that were given no space in high modernist plans. Drawing on his earlier work in political anthropology, his analysis of the geopolitical environment emphasized the involvement and accountability of the Ethiopian state, investors, and donors. In 2015, at the Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Warsaw he sent a paper to be read aloud, as he was unable to attend in person. He found clear words about a looming disaster: ‘I have been trying to persuade the Ethiopian government, its Western donors and anyone else prepared to listen that urgent steps are needed to prevent hydropower and irrigation development in the Omo Valley becoming a development disaster for the downstream population of around 100,000 agro-pastoralists’. He continued: ‘I have since concentrated on raising awareness of the issue more widely, partly in the hope that my message will get through to those who know and care about Ethiopia, partly as an act of solidarity with the affected people and partly because I have taken to heart Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s dictum, “Not to speak is to speak”’.<sup>9</sup>

Staying silent in the face of injustice was not an option for David; he preferred to find solutions. When health issues prevented him from travelling, colleagues and students made their way to London to listen, exchange ideas, and learn from him. During these visits, David and Pat welcomed us warmly—with tea, food, and vivid discussions. These moments meant the world to those working on the frontlines of land grabs and ethical dilemmas. And both David and Pat made us feel that we, too, meant the world to them.

<sup>8</sup> For a selected list of publications, including unpublished advocacy works, see bibliography below.

<sup>9</sup> D. Turton, ‘Hydropower and Irrigation Development in the Lower Omo Valley: Development for Whom?’, Paper presented at the 19th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies: Ethiopia – Diversity and Interconnections through Space and Time, Warsaw, 24–28 August 2015, Panel 6.07 (unpublished). A later version was published in D. Turton, ‘Hydropower and Irrigation Development in the Omo Valley: Development for Whom?’, *Antropologia Publica*, 4/1 (2018), 51–64.

For our *Lands of the Future* volume,<sup>10</sup> we spent a morning in David's favourite cafe around the corner from his and Pat's home in London. David had been unwell for some time and said he was not really prepared. What followed was one of the most detailed peer reviews I have received. We looked at empirical details and theoretical framings, historical backgrounds, and future solutions. The margins of the printouts were covered with hand-written comments, and we went through them one by one. On one article he noted: 'If the author is looking for a job as consultant, then the author should say so. Yet, it would be more valuable to concentrate on the findings to not have background noise in such an excellent article.' The author agreed when I forwarded this remark. David could listen, and he could hear background noise and hidden agendas in article drafts. He also reminded me that an edited volume stands and falls with the introduction and to take on that responsibility with courage.

Whereas David was a firm supporter of genuine and sustainable development opportunities, his detailed suggestions to ensure their success with a 'do no harm' approach were largely ignored. The hardship he had predicted for people of the Omo Valley, based on his analysis, became inevitable: development forced displacements, impoverishment of pastoralists who were self-dependent before the plantations, an increasing lack of safety, environmental degradation, failure of floodings and uncontrolled floodings (he had calculated in detail), food insecurity, outbreaks of violence due to grievances, and increasing pressure.

In his final article, David looked back on how the River Basin Development in Ethiopia's Omo Valley had broken 'every rule in the book'. Despite his long-standing engagement as a public anthropologist, offering well intentioned advice, and sharing his knowledge and energy, he had to conclude: 'While we have no reason to doubt the sincerity of this aspiration [to improve livelihoods], it is difficult not to conclude that the disaster now being played out in the Lower Omo is the result of a fundamentally authoritarian, repressive and racist state-building project in Ethiopia, going back at least to the time of Yohannes IV'.<sup>11</sup> These strong words also refer to serious human rights violations committed in the course of the development projects—violations for which survivors continue to await recognition and redress.

<sup>10</sup> E. C. Gabbert, Fana Gebresenbet, J. G. Galaty, G. Schlee, eds, *Lands of the Future: Anthropological Perspectives on Pastoralism, Land Deals and Tropes of Modernity in Eastern Africa* (New York, NY–Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> D. Turton, "'Breaking Every Rule in the Book": The Story of River Basin Development in Ethiopia's Omo Valley', in E. C. Gabbert, Fana Gebresenbet, J. G. Galaty, G. Schlee, eds, *Lands of the Future: Anthropological Perspectives on Pastoralism, Land Deals and Tropes of Modernity in Eastern Africa*. (New York, NY–Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2021), 244.

Throughout his career, David relentlessly tried to open ears and eyes to the injustices faced by marginalized communities. He presented facts—calmly, with passion, meticulously researched in cooperation with local experts and people across disciplines. His insights came together in clear-sighted, solution-oriented analysis, always accompanied by thoughtful proposals for a better, more just future. What affected his health was not only illness, but also the empathy for those whose suffering in the name of development was met with silence. In his Warsaw speech he wrote: ‘... projects like the Gibe III Dam and the Kuraz Sugar Development Project, which set out to increase aggregate economic growth without regard for social justice and individual rights are not worthy of the name development. In the words of Michael Cernea, they “leave a disgracing stain on development itself”’.<sup>12</sup>

On 9 December 2023 David departed from a world that he had enriched in countless ways. A world that too often shows little interest in honest, future-oriented science that honors and learns from indigenous knowledge. And yet, what he leaves behind speaks clearly: what he stood for and what he taught us in his writings and words, his gentle presence, his laughter, resilience, and unwavering persistence and integrity. The doors he opened as scientist, mentor, and friend—to guide scholars and policy makers to understand and connect different worldviews respectfully, thoughtfully and peacefully for the good of all—remain open. David’s legacy continues to offer paths, especially to those in power, reminding us that lasting solutions begin with listening to those too often unheard, with understanding, and with the effort to build a common future—not shaped by short term gains but by knowledge, cooperation, and responsibilities beyond our time on earth.

Many pastoralists bless earth and sky with the first milk in the morning—all that is, those who were, those who are, and those who will come—to remind ourselves of our brief sojourn in the passing of time. This centers us on acting responsibly, connecting our actions to the past and towards a good future. In 2023, David once more returned to Mursi country together with Pat and his family, to connect to people and places that have formed and blessed his life.

The agro pastoralist Arbore (autonym: Hor) of Southern Ethiopia say: ‘The moment one leaves the earth, one enters the land of noble truth’. There is no doubt that David would not have to learn a thing in that land, because truth was his

<sup>12</sup> D. Turton, ‘Hydropower and Irrigation Development in the Lower Omo Valley: Development for Whom?’, *Antropologia Pubblica*, 4/1 (2018), 60, citing M. M. Cernea and H. M. Mathur, eds, *Can Compensation Prevent Impoverishment? Reforming Resettlement through Investments and Benefit-Sharing* (Oxford–New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.

goal in all he did. This made him an anthropologist, teacher, mentor, advisor, friend, husband, father, and grandfather who can truly rest in peace—and power.

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

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**In memoriam Hermann Amborn (1933–2024)**

MAGNUS TREIBER, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

‘Theft is seen not as a conflict between victim and perpetrator but rather as an unsolidaristic act posing a danger to the community. There are serious provisions for its punishment. The degree to which theft may destroy a community is made clear in the Burji myth, which is also familiar to the Konso and Borana: theft of a sacrificial lamb and the conflicts arising from it produced irrevocable divisions among the Burji, Konso, and Borana, who had lived together in peace until then’.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> H. Amborn, *Law as Refuge of Anarchy: Societies without Hegemony or State* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), 122.