

THE HEALING ARTS OF BODY PAINTING:
LESSONS LEARNT FROM MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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During my undergraduate degree in Archaeology and Anthropology, I took an option paper in Medical Anthropology. Later, while I was excavating in Sudan and then working for an NGO in South Africa, I often recalled aspects of the medical anthropology course. I decided to return to Oxford in 2007 to begin the MSc in Medical Anthropology. My travels in Sudan inspired me to write my MSc dissertation on the healing qualities of Nuba body painting. Based on this project I received an AHRC grant, and I began my DPhil. My thesis, entitled 'Beyond the Social Skin: Healing Arts and Sacred Clays among the Mun (Mursi) of Southwest Ethiopia', is a unique medical ethnography of body painting. Medical anthropology not only caused me to ask *if* body painting was medicinal, it also provided me with the theoretical background to explain *how* it has become the keystone of local Mun medical culture.

It is a matter of surprise that the Nuer priesthood should have this association with the earth and take its most common title from it.

(Evans-Pritchard, 1956:292)

Anthropology has a rich legacy in East African pastoralist studies, to which Oxford's Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology has contributed greatly. However, there has been little focus on local knowledge of earthy substances, which became apparent as I began to explore the healing arts of body painting among the Mun, an agro-pastoral community in southwest Ethiopia. Therefore, I have incorporated but also looked beyond the anthropology of pastoralism by drawing on key ideas taught in medical anthropology at Oxford, namely the theories of the body, and *habitus* as understood within an ecological framework. The focus of my work is on the processes, techniques and substances of body painting, which are often overlooked by anthropological studies in favour of the product of the painted body. Finally, I explore body

painting in relation to local sensory experiences, particularly healing treatments and ritual processes that generate synchronicity or consubstantiality.

The Body Ecologic

Established theories about body arts and the body more generally fail to shed light on the healing potential of body arts. Anthropologists have mainly drawn upon the *social body*, the *body politic* and the *individual body* in ways that do not urge us to consider fleshy human life, illness, decay and local ecological experiences. Fortunately, certain medical anthropologists are now prioritising these considerations, which I draw upon here to expand our understanding of body arts.

Margaret Lock's (1993a, 1993b) notion of *local biologies* in many ways begins the process of re-appropriating the biological body into anthropological theory. She focuses on local variations of bodily experience and exposes regional differences in the interpretation and application of scientific knowledge, thereby challenging the biomedical 'master narrative' of the physiological body as a universal backdrop to social life.¹ Likewise, Elisabeth Hsu (1999, 2007) variously points out the shortcomings of a master narrative for understanding contemporary concepts and practices concerning the body and medicines. Complementing 'the three bodies' (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), she proposes a framework she calls the *body ecologic*, explaining that, 'In many medicines, humans are considered co-substantial with the natural environment, and accordingly...many key terms... convey culture-specific knowledge about ecological processes' (2007:92). She takes a historical approach to people's interaction with their

¹ Lock's explanation for the general absence of discourse on the biological body in contemporary social anthropology is that the discipline has relied upon the concept of 'universal biology' partly to escape accusations of racism and partly to create a clear domain for the study of socio-cultural constructions (such as gender rather than sex in a physiological sense); the latter are asserted in contrast to the universals of biology as being best explored through the concept of the *social body*.

natural environment—common ecological, climatic and seasonal realities—examining local ways in which they were initially understood and later systematised as bodily and medical concepts.

Using the framework of the *body ecologic*, I situate local body painting within historical experiences of the environment. Body painting practices and other healing arts relate to local processes that allow people to become consubstantial with their environment. When I refer to consubstantiality, it is to the unification or process of becoming united through a common substance, nature or essence.² Common substances in the local body painting practice—clays, earths, ash and dung—are used to adjust and attune people to one another and to their environment in many preventive and therapeutic ways. For example, as people travel between places, a range of substances beckon to them. Once a man called Kuturameri took me to Horonê. While I was taking photographs, Kuturameri had his hands in the ‘sandy yellow-orange soil’ (*ngashagai*) for which this place was well-known, and was rubbing it vigorously into his scalp (Figure 1).

² Such ideas are also present in East African anthropology, where Geissler and Prince (2010:155, 158) explore the JoUhero act of sharing, contact, nurture and nearness as processes through which ‘consubstantiality’ is obtained, for example, between mother and child.



Figure 1. Kuturameri rubbing yellow-earth over his head (Horonê, November 2010)

I am not the first to notice this compulsion to consume earthy substances. David Turton visited Gormê Girong in 1970, a ‘natural amphitheatre’, as he aptly describes it, where ‘ceremonial duelling’ (*donga*) used to be held. Following his visit, Turton (pers. comm., 2010, Field Notebook XIX, 4 November 1970) states that:

A broken camera makes me use words. I'm sitting overlooking this flat, grey-white pan, about 50 yards across, bounded to north and east by 'heaps' of *bha golonya* [red earth], and to the west and south by Omo bush. These heaps of red earth look like the slag from some massive earth work - which I suppose, in a way they are. The Omo has been working away at this country for millions of years...millions of years staring you in the face.... The birds chatter. The sun gets hotter. And Babenna sits in silence, having smeared his lower face in yellow clay (*ngashagai*). It's a special place.

Four decades later I sat at the same place taking photographs. As soon as we arrived in Gormê Girong my companion, Kuturameri, rushed off to rub yellow ‘clay’ (which he called *dhebi*, rather than *ngashagai*) around his mouth. This is exactly what Babenna, Turton’s companion, had done so many years before. In contrast to Turton’s and my own abstract appreciation of the place which led us to admire, reflect or photograph, Babenna and Kuturameri reacted by getting their hands stuck into the place, consuming its contents and blurring the boundary between themselves and the earth.

This blurring between people and place is apparent in the way body painting is spoken about. Local discussion reveals the fluidity between ‘eating’, ‘living’, ‘body painting’ and ‘dwelling’ in a place. For example, people discuss the act of one person applying clay to another or to themselves as being ‘hit’ (*dhaga*) with clay, evocative of the active qualities that earthy substances are locally known to possess. ‘Eating’ (*bhaga* or *ama*) clay is also a common expression used to describe ‘painting’, ‘smearing’, ‘rubbing’, ‘anointing’ or ‘applying’ earthy substances to the body. *Bhaga* and *ama* are the same words as those used to describe the eating of food. It is common to hear someone say *kabaghi dhebi*, ‘I eat clay’, or *kabhagi achuck*, ‘I eat meat’, even though the first describes the application of clay to the body and the second describes the ingestion of meat. Perhaps this reflects the experience that, by applying earthy substances to one’s body, something is appropriated from the earths. It is also of interest that, when people express where someone lives, there are grammatical allusions to the close relationship between person and place. This is apparent when one asks ‘Where do you live?’, which is often stated more literally as ‘Where do you eat?’ (*inye bhagi ori?*). If one lives in a place called Elisay, the answer might be, ‘I eat Elisay’ (*anyi kabhagi Elisay*), which is striking because this expression uses the accusative rather than locative case. Compare this to the

question, ‘Where is [the man called] Kowlesir?’ (*Kowlesir i ori?*), to which the answer might be ‘Kowlesir is at Elisay’ (*Kowlesir i Elisayê*), where Elisay is in the locative case, as one might expect when describing a location. Although linguistic expression is its own system and cannot be considered to reflect thinking in a direct way, the above reveals something about local experiences: when people speak of ‘eating’ clay and ‘eating’ where they live, we have an insight into their local awareness of the fluidity between persons, substance and place, something I describe as their consubstantiality with the environment.

This consubstantiality must be continually renewed, which is as important for contemporary people as it has been historically as they move from place to place. For as Turton (cf, 1979, 2011) demonstrates, the Mun are a moral community who emerge through an on-going journey or migration. They see no conflict in both belonging to a place and constantly moving to new environments. When the Mun say they ‘came from the earth’, they are expressing their inextricable relationship with the earth. However, oral history tells us that most families came from elsewhere. I suggest that they reconcile the notion of being of a place and yet not ‘originally’ from that place because for them, the notion of being autochthons is not something fixed, but is continually re-affirmed and renewed through their relationships with local earthy substances, even as they move from place to place.

To illustrate this, I examine specialist ritual families known generically as *e’wu* (sg. *e’na*). Different families are *e’wu* of different places and substances, but they are not considered as the ‘owners’ of these places and clays, but as their ‘custodians’. Each generation develops a custodial role by ‘eating’ the earths and enacting certain ritual techniques, thus enabling people to live in a place successfully. For example, many *e’wu* use a ritual technique called *sheshegé*, which involves ‘fine-tuning’ or ‘re-aligning’ cosmic forces for the good of the community. It is

through body painting and related techniques, such as *sheshegé*, that adjustments—physiological, social and metaphysical—are made to attune people to their local ecology, thus enabling them to flourish.

Such relationships must be constantly renewed through rituals in which clay is ‘eaten’. For example, a young Juhai-Gunaseno man called Ulilu took me to various places around Chollo where his family was considered *e’wu*. After a few hours walking in the coolness of the early morning, we rested. In his eagerness to show me how well prepared he was, he produced a small pouch of black clay that he (or one of his relatives) had collected on a previous visit to his family’s clay pits. He had brought it with him in case the clay in the river bed did not ‘recognise’ him as *e’wu*, for the clay ‘hits’ (*dhaga*) all non-*e’wu* with certain afflictions. The notion of clay recognising itself is another indication that *e’wu* do not simply inherit their consubstantiality with an environment, they must re-affirm it through the performance of rituals and the uses of earthy substances.

I suggest that historically, by conducting various daily and ritual actions, early or recent arrivals in an environment were able to become autochthonous or consubstantial with a place. Contemporary families also realise that their relationships with a place must be continually renewed and re-attuned. Likewise Evans-Pritchard (1940:120) observed that, amongst the Nuer,

sometimes men who intend to leave the tribe of their birth to settle permanently in another tribe take with them some earth of their country and drink it in a solution of water, slowly adding to each dose a greater amount of soil from their new country, thus gently breaking mythical ties with the old and building up mythical ties with the new.

Developing ‘mythical ties’ to a place strikes me as similar to what biological anthropology calls ‘adapting’ or ‘acclimatizing’ to a new place, and I refer to this process as becoming consubstantial. Through body painting and other such artful ways of living, local and historically

grounded ecological experiences give rise to a medical culture and a religious framework where the consumption of clay is recognised and valued as therapeutic, powerful and sacred. Such an examination reveals local insights into the body's consubstantiality or emplacement within the local environment: clearly the Mun conceive of and behave in terms of the *body ecologic*.

The substances and processes of body painting

Boivin (2004) suggests that anthropologists often ignore minerals and earths. However, I am nevertheless surprised at the general absence of detail regarding earthy substances shown by the anthropology of body arts, where the substances are often overlooked. For a community like the Mun, the various substances—earths, clays, powdered chalks, ash, soot from charred wood and dung—often give rise to the impetus to body-paint. Examining how people develop a familiarity with earthy substances, how they collect clays and when they are 'eaten' reveals depths of local discernment and shows that the substances themselves have an active role in how and why people use them.

In this regard, aspects of medical anthropology can deepen our understanding of the substances used in body painting. Drawing on ethnobotany, several medical anthropologists emphasise that what outsiders often see as natural substances, herbs or remedies are often the product of local knowledge and complex preparations. For example, Hsu (2010) suggests that, since 'natural herbs' and pharmaceutical drugs are both subject to specific forms of processing, both should more fittingly be described as 'drugs'. In so arguing, Hsu is not reducing the focus to the 'active ingredient' of a medicine, but rather recognising the importance of traditional or local processes and techniques of preparation. Similarly, when we attend to the subtle, context-

dependent, opportunistic ways in which substances and situations clearly invite the Mun to consume earths, we can observe local technical knowledge of body painting's healing qualities.

For those of us who have not grown up using earthy substances for the maintenance of our health, it requires a conceptual jump to comprehend their beneficial and vitality-enhancing properties. By noticing the different ways in which people engage with earthy substances generally, and not simply in ritualized body-painting processes, I learnt to appreciate that these substances are primarily experienced, rather than being abstractly studied. One event in particular transformed my understanding of how people interact with and perceive these substances. A three-year-old boy had asked me to escort him beyond the village so that he could defecate. While he was behind a bush he called my name; '*Ngakêti! Ngakêti!*', afraid I would leave him behind. He soon jumped on to the path, pleased to see me waiting, and I turned to walk back to the village: 'Wait!' he exclaimed, and then he sat down, legs horizontally in front of him, and dragged his bare bottom across the earth. So this was how he cleaned himself. Subsequently I observed many mothers doing just that with their babies. What initially appeared as 'dirt' to me gradually showed itself to be a part of the self's daily and ritual engagement with the environment. The earth and the immediate surroundings are cleansing to those who know how to make use of them in this and other ways. Daily intimacy and ease of interaction with all forms of earthy substances provide a valuable insight into the pervasive and persistent role that earth plays in daily life. Much body painting happens in a mundane context: around the hearth, cleaning the baby, going to wash at the river, while out with the cattle or when walking along a path.

This ongoing engagement with earthy substances creates connoisseurs who are keenly aware of the multiple properties of earth. This is evident from the scope of people's knowledge of earthy outcrops. On one occasion a group of older boys in Ulumholi sat discussing where

cream, pink, green-blue, or yellow earth or clay might be found. My questions on this issue had incited a torrent of impassioned responses, demonstrating their acute sensitivity to the qualities and uses of different clays. Their appreciation and knowledge of earthy substances, connected as they are to daily experiences, are also gendered. Women and young girls know where to collect a ‘salty soil’ (*mudani*) used in cooking. Women also know where best to find clay to make lip-plates and cooking pots; indeed, the Mun are famous amongst their neighbours for their ability to make cooking pots. Meanwhile boys and men of any age can tell you where to find pink earths or yellow clays, which they apply to their bodies as decoration, and as protection from the sun or from certain afflictions. People are also very curious when they come across unknown earthy substances. For example, if presented with an unfamiliar nugget of ochre, clay or soil, a person would taste its flavour and assess its texture, rub it between their fingers, or spit on it and then consume it over part of their skin in order to explore the hue and intensity of the colour. There is also a sensitivity to qualities of colour and taste, which provide important information. For example, the intensity of colour and hue affects the healing potential of a clay, with really white clay considered to be the most ‘potent’ (*barari*).

People also learn that earthy substances can be used to prevent ‘afflictions’ (*muttan*) from striking. For example, clay is at the centre of a communal healing ceremony called *zuolama*, ‘rounding up the people’, or more broadly *biolama*, ‘rounding up the cattle’. This ceremony is conducted by the ‘ritual priest’ (*kômoru*) to protect and heal the community and cattle from afflictions. People use grey/brown clay (*dhebi-a-gidanga*) collected from a pit in Diirikôrro. The clay from Diirikôrro is said to send affliction into the ground, back to where it came from. The colour ‘grey/brown’ (*gidangi*) can also be translated as ‘dirty’ or ‘contaminated’, and if applied to the skin this clay is said to frighten away afflictions. During the ceremony, the ‘dirty’ clay is

applied to the entire community for three days, morning and evening. On the fourth and final day, everyone ‘washes’ (*tonyo*) with white clay. People make sure that everyone is anointed, with friends and loved ones waking each other up before sunrise. These collective painting ceremonies give the impression of a mass inoculation, strengthening their communion with one another and with the environment.

As Bourdieu notes (1977:72), the material conditions of one’s environment produce one’s *habitus*. So it is that for the Mun their *habitus* becomes earth-centred in addition to the well-documented ‘cattle-complex’ (Herskovits, 1926). Consuming earths shapes the unique dialogue between the environment and a bodily way of being. One significance of this is that body painting in all its daily dimensions—the practices, substances and contexts in which earthy substances are consumed—facilitates an interconnection, or communion, with earths and with the local environment, which is widely experienced both to prevent and to cure various afflictions.

Generating synchronicity

So far, I have described the way that body painting unites a person with a substance and a place so that they become consubstantial with their environment. However, body painting also unites people with one another. An examination of the process of ‘eating’ clays shows that body painting is part of the way a community creates and strengthens its inter-connectedness. There is a solidarity expressed in the communal process of consuming clays, touching one another as the clay is smeared down another’s face, chest and arms. The way a local priest applies clay to people is an example of how the body-painting process strengthens a community. Once the clay is on the priest’s palms, he holds them up to the person’s face, pausing for the person to prepare to ‘eat’. Even if the person is already waiting patiently, the priest would freeze momentarily,

hands held up, before connecting with the person's face. The person 'eating' the clay leans forward, head bent in a supplicatory position, eyes closed, body compliant and motionless, tense in expectation. This anticipatory pause, albeit fleeting, marks the moment in which she prepares to come together with the priest and the clay in the act of 'eating'.

Figure 2 illustrates this moment of synchronicity through a series of actions from left to right. On the left, the priest's assistant, Ulisirwa, stands at the 'mouth' of a stone circle and holds his hands up to the child's face, while in the background the child's grandmother is withdrawing the hand she had placed on the child's head to keep the child still for the priest. The central photograph shows the child staring down at her chest to see what the priest had just done. The final photograph is of the child's grandmother consuming the grey clay. The intensity of such exchanges is heightened by the fact that this process captivates bystanders, who often stop and intently observe, even though all but the youngest will have seen this process many times before.



Figure 2. A sequence of three images, in which a priest applies 'grey' clay to two little girls and their grandmother (Ulumholi July 2013)

The intensity of this process and the technique of consuming earths has what Lewis (1980:80) identified as the ‘alerting quality’ of ritual. Following on, Hsu (2013) has noted alerting qualities when it comes to sensory experience in therapeutics. What she calls the ‘phenomenology of healing’ includes technologies that cause ‘presence’ and a blurring between self and world. This, Hsu suggests, can trigger a group experience in which people momentarily come to form ‘one body’ in a moment of ‘synchronicity’.

My own research shows that synchronicity can also be generated between people and their environment. In ‘eating’ the clays and momentarily collapsing the boundaries between self and other, the Mun are exploring their consubstantiality with one another and with the places and substances they ‘eat’. Other studies have also found synchronicity or consubstantiality occurring widely and in different contexts. For example, Geissler and Prince (2010:10) describe processes whereby material substances—like rain, blood, semen, milk, beer and porridge—and physical ‘participation’ between living and dead persons, things and places, are all imbued with meaning, leading to ‘growth’. They draw upon an array of examples of transformative interactions in Africa: ‘interfusion’ (Lienhardt, 1985:154), ‘participation’ (Moore, 1986:112), ‘embeddedness’ (Boddy, 1998:256) or ‘interbeing’ (Devisch, 2007:118). I can add to the list ‘simultaneity’ (Parkin, 1991), being ‘melded together’ (Friedson, 1996:23), the ‘transfiguration of being’ (Davis, 2000:274), and ‘being with’ (Stroeken, 2010:68). The way in which earthy substances are consumed is no exception and adds to this growing body of work on technologies that generate ‘synchronicity’.

Closing thoughts: body painting and medical anthropology

If, as Margaret Lock (1993b:332) suggests, the ‘bread and butter of medical anthropologists’ is the problematizing of the body, then medical anthropology is merely continuing a tradition begun by the anthropology of body arts.³ For as O’Hanlon has noted (2007:4), ‘until relatively recently the topic of “the body” in anthropology could be *defined* largely in terms of body arts.’ By examining the healing arts of body painting, I suggest that medical anthropology and the anthropology of body arts have a lot to offer one another. Examining body arts from the perspective of medical anthropology has allowed me to challenge the dominance of the ‘social skin’ in the anthropology of body arts, where the focus has too often been on identity making and socialisation. Instead, I have been able to seriously consider how body painting serves as a healing art, which buffers a community from disease and situate them within a place through an ongoing process of becoming consubstantial with their social and natural environment.

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³ I use the term ‘body arts’, following O’Hanlon (2007: 3), to emphasise the breadth of practices that fall into this category.

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