

Jon Aronson



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Above: A male white-eared kob; these are the most numerous antelopes of the Murle area.

Top left: A Murle hunter wearing a lion's mane headdress.



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Left: A Murle hunter carrying home his share of the meat from a successful hunt.

Murle: Traditional Hunters of Sudan

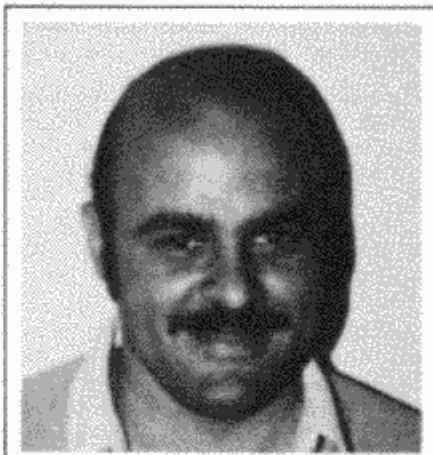
by Jon Arensen

MURLE HUNTING: NATURAL PREDATION?

The Murle people live in south-eastern Sudan between the Nile River and the Ethiopian border. Their country is harsh; for half the year it is flooded and wet and for the other half parched and dry. The Murle people are often hard pressed to find enough to eat. They are primarily a cattle people, sustaining themselves on the milk, meat, and blood of their cattle herds. There are long periods during the dry season when these herds are taken many miles away to find pasturage, leaving the people at home with little to eat. The Murle do practice some agriculture during the rainy season, planting millet, corn, and pumpkins. When these are harvested there is a short period during which there is plenty of food. However, these crops are soon finished and the Murle must rely on hunting and fishing to provide a large part of their diet.

This area of Sudan has few people but large numbers of wild animals. For example the population of the white-eared kob was estimated at almost one million during a recent survey by the New York Zoological Society. Because of their migratory patterns, the majority of the wildlife only passes through the Murle area for a few weeks each year. Heavy hunting takes place during this time. For the rest of the year the animals are quite free from hunting pressure. The Murle and other tribes of this region have hunted the wildlife for centuries. Because of the vast numbers of the animals, the limited number of hunters, and the traditional hunting methods which limit overkill, the ecosystem is in balance with both humans and animals playing an important part.

The hunting of animals is done by the men and the weapon normally used is a spear. This spear has a narrow one-foot-long blade and a long thin wooden shaft. The spear is normally thrown but occasionally, at close quarters, it is simple driven into an animal. Different methods of hunting are used with different species of animals.



Jon Arensen grew up in Tanzania near the Serengeti where at an early age he developed a deep interest in natural history. After college he came to Kenya where he taught at the Rift Valley Academy for three years. There he taught ecology and during holidays travelled around East Africa to expand his understanding of the subject. Since 1974, Jon and his family have been working in the Southern Sudan under the Ministry of Education as linguist-anthropologist among the Murle people.

The most common prey of the Murle is the white-eared kob which migrate through the Pibor area twice a year. The first migration of kob comes north along the Kengen and Lotilla rivers during the months of November and December. They bunch up on a peninsula of land called Tolowa before they swim across the rivers and head east for the dry season. The kob return in a more spread out manner in April when they head south to avoid the flooded areas during the rainy season.

The Murle men come to Tolowa from miles around when the kob are migrating. Each night they camp on the far bank of the rivers and at dawn swim quietly across the rivers to the peninsula where kob have arrived during the night. The hunters converge on the peninsula from all sides and spear many of them on the initial attack. Then they spread out through the forest and take stands about 30 feet from one another. The kob still in the forest panic and run, coming in range

It may seem odd to find an article on hunting in a conservation magazine. However, the hunting described in this article is not illegal nor is it done for commercial reasons. The Sudan is unique in that it allows tribal people to hunt animals for food providing they use traditional "native weapons". The author argues that in this area the hunting is a part of the natural predation system and does not damage the population of the wildlife but rather helps keep it in balance. He also believes that hunting is an integral part of the Murle culture and therefore should be allowed to continue. For a person to see examples of cultures which have been totally destroyed because their hunting practices were restricted, he suggests that they look at the Waliangulu of Tsavo, the Ik of Uganda, or the Hadza of Tanzania.

of one hunter after another. Each of these hunters throws his spear as the animals dash by and although not the best of shots the hunters score many a direct hit.

Other kob are chased into the river or out onto the mud flats. Here it is heavy going and the hunters are able to out-swim or out-run the kob and thrust their spears into the animals.

The kob tend to go into shock as soon as they are struck with a spear. They usually stop running and give up, after which they are quickly killed. They seem to go into shock in the same way as an antelope pulled down by a lion. Suffering is usually short and minimal.

When a hunter spears a kob he cuts off the ear from the side of the animal which the spear entered and this ear is worn as a trophy of the hunt. At a later date these ears will be presented to the hunter's future mother-in-law to prove that he is a good provider. By mid-morning many of the kob on the peninsula have been killed. The men spend the rest of the morning butchering the animals and carrying them across the river. The women then come and carry the meat back to their homesteads.

During other times of the year when the animals are more spread out the hunting techniques are different. Several men will attempt to stalk a small herd of

...Murle

animals and get within spearing distance. This is quite difficult in open country. It is easier along the rivers where there is heavier bush and therefore better cover for the hunters. This technique of stalking and throwing the spear is used on any species of animal and is occasionally successful on larger animals than kob.

Lions are prized for their manes which are used for making headresses. Lion meat is also eaten. When Murle hunters find a lion, they will follow it at a safe distance. They keep the lion in sight until the heat of the day when the lion gets tired and goes to sleep in the shade of a tree. One hunter will stealthily approach the sleeping lion and using a spear with a wide blade, thrust it into the lion's chest. The Murle have no interest in proving their bravery by facing a charging, angry lion but prefer to kill it by stealth. Of course even a sleeping lion is no mean prey to a man with only a spear in his hand.

Buffalo are another dangerous animal hunted by the Murle. In the hilly areas around Boma the hunters sometimes arrange a buffalo drive. The hunters will study the area in which a buffalo herd lives and eventually choose a ravine which they frequent. On the day of the drive a number of hunters with large spears will position themselves at the bottom of the ravine, hiding behind boulders and trees. Other Murle will then go around behind the herd as it approaches the top of the ravine and by shouting will panic the buffalo into stampeding down the ravine. When the buffalo run by the waiting hunters, they step out and thrust their large spears into the buffalo and then quickly take cover. It is possible during a successful drive to kill several buffalo in this manner.

Some hunters will choose a waterhole which animals frequent and dig a pit nearby. This pit is carefully camouflaged and the hunter waits inside with his spear. When an animal approaches and begins to drink the hunter steps out and throws his spear at the animal. This method is frequently used with antelope and is also successful with buffalo, lions, and hyenas.

Dogs have an important part in hunting and are frequently used by the Murle. These dogs are trained to catch antelope and hold them until the hunters can arrive and dispatch the animal. Animals being held by dogs are not usually speared but are killed with a heavy club. A more bizarre method is by hitting the animal on the back of the head with a heavy metal bracelet which the Murle wear on their wrist. Death is instantaneous.

When two or more dogs are used they often surround the animal and hold it at bay. With smaller animals, like kob, the dogs are capable of killing it themselves. Several dogs will harass the kob from the rear until one succeeds in get-



Alan Becks

White-eared kob crossing water in the Sudan.

ting a firm hold on the throat and throttles the animal. The dogs will not eat the meat but will wait until the hunters come and cut up the animal. Then they will get their share.

Murle dogs are well cared for and are solidly built animals with short hair, loose tough skin, and long muscular legs. They have a springy step and can run at a fast speed for long distances. Most hunting dogs are males that have been castrated so that they spend their energies hunting rather than looking for females. Since they are castrated the dogs work well together in packs without any fighting.

The dogs are used primarily when the animal migrations are spread out. They are particularly effective with kob in the Pibor area. Further out in the plains the primary purpose of the dogs is to catch tiang (an antelope similar to topi). The dogs are useful during the rest of the year by catching small animals such as serval cats, genets, mongooses and oribi. These all provide welcome meat for the Murle.

The bow and arrow is not used by Murle for normal hunting. Small bows with long, pronged arrows are made by the boys and used to shoot small birds. They are not very effective and provide little in the way of food.

There are various traps used by the Murle. The most commonly used is a wall of thorns set up along a game trail with gaps left in the wall. Snares made of rope, called "curi" are placed in these gaps. These snares are set during the migration periods when there is game moving about. The trappers stay near, killing the animals as soon as they are caught and re-setting the snares. When a herd of antelope approach the fence, the hunters chase them into the bottleneck and the panicked animals are more readily caught.

The Murle men also use the jerk snare which they call "kamcic". They dig a small hole in a frequently used game trail and a rope noose with a slip knot is set around the hole and fastened under

tension to a bent-over tree. When an animal steps on the trigger the tree jerks upward tightening the rope around the animal's leg. It can result with a small animal being suspended in space.

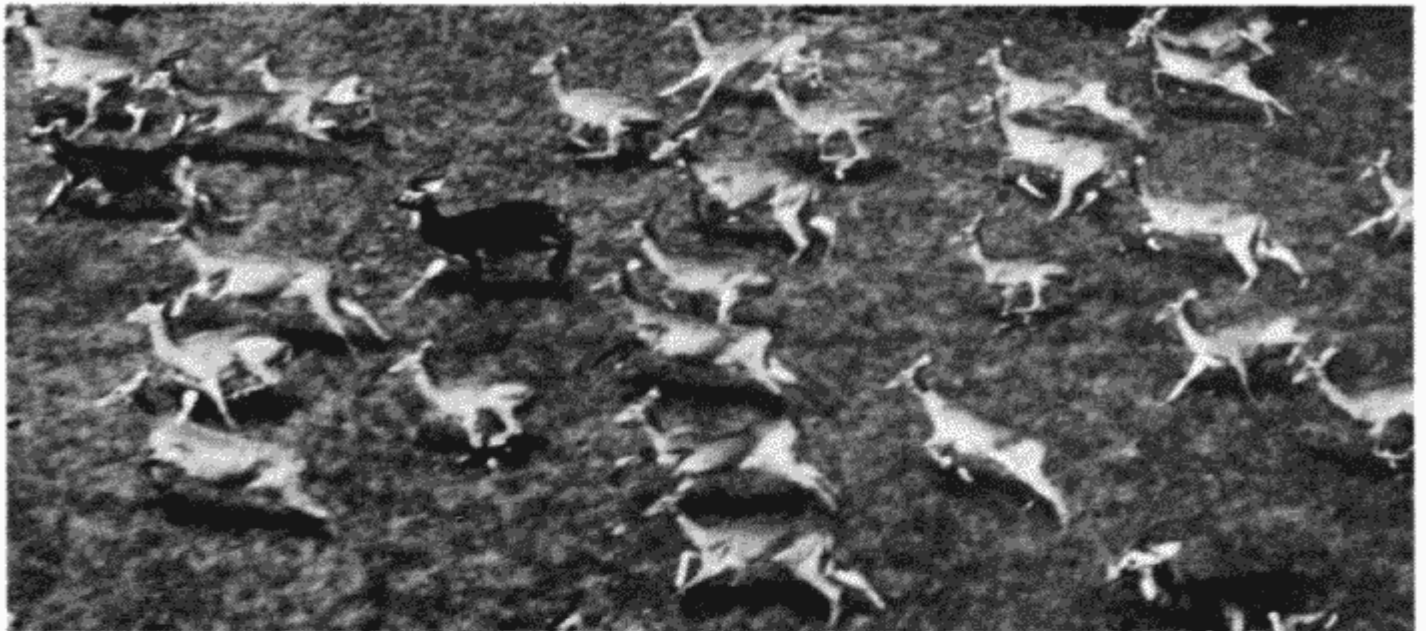
A smaller variation of the jerk snare is used to catch birds. In this case the noose is set several inches above the ground. A trail of grain is laid out and birds such as guinea fowl, partridges, or doves follow the trail of grain until finally they peck the trigger inside the noose and are caught around the neck.

Fall traps are used for killing smaller animals. These are constructed by placing a heavy log or stone on edge and balancing it with a stick. Bait is placed under this heavy object. When the animal comes and seizes the bait the trigger is set off and the animal is crushed. This sort of trap is called "tarabak".

There is a specialized version of the "tarabak" used for mice and rats. Small sticks are woven into a grid and several inches of mud are plastered over them. When this has hardened it makes a heavy plate-like object. This is set on edge and crushes the rats when they attempt to get at the bait which is placed underneath. The Murle granaries are plagued by rodents so the Murle are constantly trying to kill them. The meat of the rat is considered a delicacy by the Murle.

There are also various types of live traps and although there are different sizes they all operate on the same principle. These types of traps can be anything from a small house to a box, depending on the size of animal they wish to trap. Small houses are used for leopards and baboons while smaller structures are used for animals such as mongooses and monkeys. Bait is placed inside the trap. When the animal enters and seizes the bait the door fall down, trapping the animal.

Pits are occasionally dug to catch hyenas. Meat is thrown into these pits and hyenas jump down into the pit to get the meat and cannot climb out. These pits are used mostly in the Boma area since



White-eared kob migrating in the Sudan.

Alan Brink

the clay in the plains is very difficult to dig.

To catch small birds the boys get a sticky sap from certain trees. They place dry branches in an open field and smear them with the sticky sap. When a small bird lands on the branch its feet get stuck in the glue. Often grain is scattered around the sticky branches to attract the birds.

The Murle who keep chickens are often bothered by kites and other hawks which swoop down and catch the baby chicks. They have developed a unique way of dealing with these pests. They make a loose ball of twine and grass and place a smoldering piece of charcoal within it and a piece of meat on top of it to attract the hawk. When a hawk swoops down and seizes the meat it gets its talons caught in the ball of twine and carries it off along with the meat. With the movement of air the smoldering charcoal soon bursts into flame and ignites the twine which the hawk cannot release. This in turn burns the feathers off the

hawk which falls to the ground and dies, thus ridding the Murle of the menace to their chickens.

The meat of animals is vitally important in the Murle diet. Normally fresh meat is cooked and eaten as soon as it is brought to the homestead. However, when there is an over abundance of meat, such as during the kob migration, some of this meat is preserved for a later date.

The preserving of meat is usually done by sun drying. The meat is cut into long thin strips and hung in the sun. The meat when dried can keep for many months before being cooked and eaten. Meat can also be smoked. Again the meat is cut into strips and then placed on racks over a smoky fire. The combination of heat and smoke preserves the meat for later use. Sometimes after meat has been dried or smoked it is put into a mortar and pounded with a pestle until it becomes powder. This dry powder will keep until reconstituted by cooking in water.

The Murle people do not hunt for sport. To them it is a serious business since their success or failure determine how well they eat or even whether they will survive at all. They are never wasteful but use every part of the animals they kill. All the meat and internal organs are eaten; the skins are used for clothing, beds, and sandals. The horns are used for trumpets and the hooves for ornamentation.

The wild animals play a meaningful part in other aspects of the Murle culture. The various age-sets each have their totem animal and abstract designs of these animals are scarred on the men's bodies. Animal folk tales and hunting stories are part of the Murle culture. The relationship between the Murle people and the animals they hunt is essential to their culture as well as to their survival. It is vitally important to realize that this hunting does not damage the wildlife population any more than the predation of carnivorous animals but is a part of the natural pattern.