



PEOPLE OF THE OMO VALLEY

รชาติสุดพิเศษ เสน่ห์อาหารใต้

DAVE STAMBOULIS TRAVELS ALONG ETHIOPIA'S OMO RIVER, BIRTHPLACE OF HUMAN CIVILISATION AND THE LAST FRONTIER OF TRIBAL AFRICAN CULTURE.

Words and photos by Dave Stamboulis

Hamar women, whose hair is traditionally coated in ochre clay



It is over 40 degrees in the shade at our camp spot in Mago National Park, a vast riparian forest and swamp that borders the Omo River and lower Rift Valley floor near the Kenyan and Sudanese borders. Biting *tsetse* flies nip at every inch of exposed flesh, malarial mosquitoes swarm the area at dawn and dusk, and the brown river water, the only option for getting rid of the all-encompassing dust that has become our constant travelling companion, is rife with crocodiles and other plagues. Sweaty and filthy, the mosquito netting of our stifling tents is the only solace from the oncoming night.

While the Mago is home to buffalo herds, wild elephants, kudu, hartebeest and abundant birdlife, my travelling companions and I are enduring the harsh conditions of the Omo not for the wildlife, but to come face to face with some of our most unique living ancestors. Paleontologists have discovered remains here of the world's oldest human civilisation, hunter-gatherers whose DNA analysis has suggested that we can trace our entire ancestry to a single woman from the Omo whose descendants eventually migrated across Arabia some 70–120,000 years ago. The offspring of these first Omo people, who have branched into various tribes such as the Mursi, Hamar, Karo, Dasanech, Nyangatom and Arbore, remain entrenched in small mud hut villages scattered along the Omo River Valley, where they live as nomadic pastoralists, growing sorghum and maize and raising cattle and goats for survival. Other than the ubiquity of yellow jerry cans used for transporting water and Kalashnikov rifles carried by the tribal men for protecting their herds (and settling scores), there are few signs of the 21st century—or even the 20th or 19th.



Clockwise from left: Dasanech mothers with their babies; the size of a Mursi woman wearing a clay lip plate; A Karo male in his elaborate face paint; young Karo men with their Kalashnikovs; a Mursi man with a fresh lion hide



The Mago's most famous residents are the Mursi, a group numbering about 9,000, whose women are renowned for the clay lip plates they wear. Custom dictates that when a Mursi woman reaches womanhood (around 18–19), a slit is cut below her lower lip, and the resulting gap is fitted with a small plate which then stretches the lip. As time passes, larger plates are inserted, and the greater the plate, the higher the price a woman's family can fetch for her when she marries. The families of women wearing the biggest plates receive around 40–50 cattle. Mursi boys are adorned in chalk body paste and spend their teen years training for dongas, a violent stick fight, with the winner getting carried off by eligible girls who will choose a wife for him.

A Mursi woman wearing a large spotted lip plate approaches me and demands that I take her portrait. Tourists here must pay five Ethiopian birr (about seven baht) to photograph tribal members, in addition to paying a community fee to enter the villages.

Macabre and violent rituals and superstitions are not only the domain of the Mursi. The Hamar girls beg to be whipped by young men who have completed a bull jumping ritual, believing those who hit the hardest will make the best providers and husbands. They bear deep scars on their backs from this, which are proudly displayed for all to see. Further along the Omo River, the Karo engage in a practice called mingi, in which babies who are considered cursed (such as twins or those whose upper teeth appear before their lower ones) are taken by tribal elders and killed to protect the village from bad fate. Further afield, the Arbore still practice female circumcision.

The Ethiopian government and NGOs have tried to stop some of these practices, and have had success in officially banning female circumcision and ensuring that all Karo births are registered. But age-old ways don't vanish easily, and the Omo remains a very remote place, with few decent

roads, minimal electricity, and all but cut off from the rest of the country during rainy season.

However all of these customs, traditions, and ancient cultures may change before we know it. The Ethiopian government is currently constructing the giant Gigele Gilbe III Dam, a mega-project which will divert water from the Omo to irrigate large cotton and sugarcane plantations and provide electricity to much of southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. If the seasonal flooding of the Omo ceases, the tribal groups will not be able to cultivate the riverbank and much of their food supply will be wiped out.

Our guide, Mamo, an Ari tribesman who lives in Jinka, the regional hub of the Omo, and who speaks Mursi, Karo, and Hamar in addition to English, drives us along the banks of the Omo River, where we come across the settlement of Kolocho, home to the Karo. The Karo are the region's smallest group, numbering only a few thousand, and whose members are known for elaborate body painting, going to great lengths to create colourful face masks made from paste, chalk and iron ore, along with body designs resembling zebra stripes, guinea fowl plumage the leopard spots.

Mamo introduces us to the village chief, an older man whose body is completely painted with pink leopard spots and face is striped like a zebra. His hair is pulled back in a tight bun, as is the coif on his son, a sign that both have either killed a large wild animal or taken a human life. Through Mamo, I ask the chief what he thinks about the steady increase of tourists coming to Kolocho these days to see the Karo. He mulls over the question, and then says that more tourists have meant more vehicles in the area, meaning it isn't always necessary for the Karo to walk three days to Dimeka, a Hamar village which hosts the largest weekly market in the region, where tribes can trade sorghum or livestock for coffee, tobacco and bullets for their Kalashnikovs.



Left and above: Hamar women prepare for the bull jumping festival
Right: An adolescent Arbore girl



ผลิตพันกับขนหวานและเงอริहाกาลีเคตี ภาพ เคนการ์

เซฟ ซุนทรีมี บัญชี หรือเซฟจี เนเกรี เซฟแห่ง โรจแมน เคป ราราชา ศรีราชา ชาวอุบลราชธานี นำประสบการณ์จากการทำงานใน โรจแมนท่าคว่ำกว่า 15 ปี ถ่ายทอดเป็นชุดขนหวานและเงอริโดย เมฆธกาสิตส์ที่ทันสมัยอย่างปราณีตด้วยชุดขนหวานเทียม ไม่ ว่าจะเป็นอินโฟเทค มาการอง แชนดิวี เคาบท์กับขนหวานและเงอริ คือ ครีเอชั่นส์ วาฟเฟิลส์ที่พร้อมโดดเด่นหลากหลาย มุมมองรางวัล ดาวก ซือโดโคเคอและเงอริสอได้ถือพลอเรนทิน

กรุณาขอ ทารุทเลโมโตสส์จีจันกับาร้อมกับรอสเลโมโตสอินเค็มคำ รามไปเบ็งกาแพตลอสตมุน และครีเอชั่นส์มอเรนอินทิการพิด คาฟเคน ทารี เออบริการทากูนันคัมคัวลาจีโมเข้าจีซีเอ็ม

เซฟ ซุนทรีมี บัญชี หรือเซฟจี เนเกรี เซฟแห่ง โรจแมน เคป ราราชา ศรีราชา ชาวอุบลราชธานี นำประสบการณ์จากการทำงานใน โรจแมนท่าคว่ำกว่า 15 ปี ถ่ายทอดเป็นชุดขนหวานและเงอริโดย เมฆธกาสิตส์ที่ทันสมัยอย่างปราณีตด้วยชุดขนหวานเทียม ไม่ ว่าจะเป็นอินโฟเทค มาการอง แชนดิวี เคาบท์กับขนหวานและเงอริ คือ ครีเอชั่นส์ วาฟเฟิลส์ที่พร้อมโดดเด่นหลากหลาย มุมมองรางวัล ดาวก ซือโดโคเคอและเงอริสอได้ถือพลอเรนทิน

กรุณาขอ ทารุทเลโมโตสส์จีจันกับาร้อมกับรอสเลโมโตสอินเค็มคำ รามไปเบ็งกาแพตลอสตมุน และครีเอชั่นส์มอเรนอินทิการพิด คาฟเคน ทารี เออบริการทากูนันคัมคัวลาจีโมเข้าจีซีเอ็ม

เซฟ ซุนทรีมี บัญชี หรือเซฟจี เนเกรี เซฟแห่ง โรจแมน เคป ราราชา ศรีราชา ชาวอุบลราชธานี นำประสบการณ์จากการทำงานใน โรจแมนท่าคว่ำกว่า 15 ปี ถ่ายทอดเป็นชุดขนหวานและเงอริโดย เมฆธกาสิตส์ที่ทันสมัยอย่างปราณีตด้วยชุดขนหวานเทียม ไม่ ว่าจะเป็นอินโฟเทค มาการอง แชนดิวี เคาบท์กับขนหวานและเงอริ คือ ครีเอชั่นส์ วาฟเฟิลส์ที่พร้อมโดดเด่นหลากหลาย มุมมองรางวัล ดาวก ซือโดโคเคอและเงอริสอได้ถือพลอเรนทิน

While the Karo are a dwindling tribe, their neighbours the Hamar are to be found all over the region. The Hamar live in the heart of the Omo, and are one of the largest and most colourful of the tribal groups. The women can be recognised by the ochre clay they adorn their hair and skin with in abundance, the goatskin hides they wear as skirts, and their cowry shell and bone necklaces, along with the large gourds they carry, used for such varied purposes as sun hats or giant cups for drinking coffee or the *talla* (sorghum beer) – which is consumed in abundance. With a population numbering around 20,000, and with the large Hamar settlements like Turmi and Dimoka hosting market days with links to the region's best roads, the Hamar are privy to most of the goods, services, and tourist dollars coming into the Omo.

completed a bull jumping ritual) responding to the taunts of the Hamar women by whipping them with wooden switches. The girls tease and prod the *maza*, telling them they are good for nothing and weak, begging to be hit harder. Witnessing this in person, I am struck by how the women come across as anything but submissive.

Following the whipping, there is more drinking and dancing before the ceremony culminates with around ten cattle being lined up, greased in clay, fat and dung to make them slippery. The bull jumper then runs across them stark naked, trying not to fall. If he makes it across four times, he has come of age, and his parents will shortly have to pay out dozens of cattle, goats and guns to another family for their daughter's hand in marriage.

Nobody knows what the future holds for the Omo tribes. Ethiopia's Prime Minister has said that the pastoralists should be modernised and not just remain as tourist attractions. The reality of the dam may be that the tribal way of life is wiped out altogether. Cell phone towers and satellite dishes are appearing around the Omo Valley, making Nokin and Samsung just as high on tribes' trading lists as rusty AK 4s. Watching the Hamar beg leaping across the bulls as the dancing, clay-covered women cheer him on, I can't help but cross my fingers that these old traditions continue to find a way of surviving – just as they have for centuries.

The highlight of any visit to the tribal areas is the possibility of getting an invite to a Karo or Hamar bull jumping festival, and Mamo's contacts have informed him that one is taking place about 30 kilometres from where we have made camp, thus we hastily pack and head excitedly into the bush.

By leaping over a lineup of cattle, a Hamar male makes his passage from boyhood to manhood, and proves himself as ready to take a wife, own cattle, and start a family. The event starts with plenty of dancing, singing, and imbibing of *talla*, followed by a pack of young men known as *maza* (who have already

TRAVEL TIPS
Ethiopia can be reached by daily flights from Bangkok to Addis Ababa on Ethiopian Airlines (Ethiopian.com), from where domestic flights go to Arba Minch. From Arba Minch, the Omo Valley can be accessed by 4WD jeeps within five hours. Tour operators and agents abound in Addis and Arba, along with the regional hub of Jinka. For a local guide who knows the area intimately, contact Bereket Tadesse (sharethecustom.com).