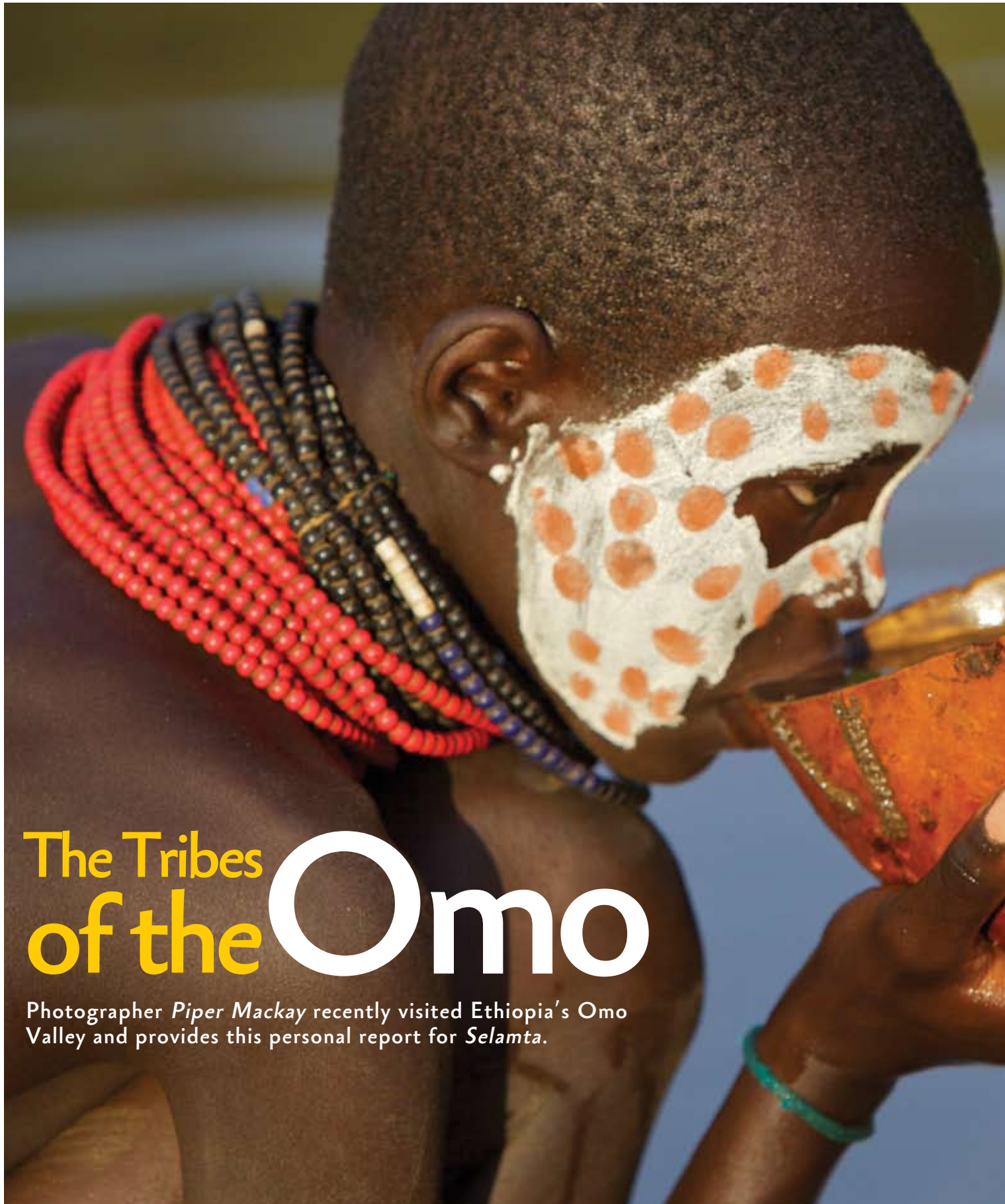


PHOTOS & STORY BY PIPER MACKAY



# The Tribes of the Omo

Photographer *Piper Mackay* recently visited Ethiopia's Omo Valley and provides this personal report for *Selamta*.



**D**ropping into the Omo Valley is like being transported back to an authentic Africa of days gone by. For generations the tribes of the Omo have been shielded from the outside world tucked away in southern Ethiopia. These tribes are amongst the last of the ornate and intact tribes living in their ancient traditions – migrating, warring and making peace in ways that have vanished almost everywhere else in Africa.

Unlike so many of the nomadic tribes throughout Africa who must constantly drive their livestock in search for water and green savannas these tribes live in close proximity to one another along the mighty Omo River. They depend on the

seasonal floods to soak and replenish the riverbanks. When the floodwater recedes they are able to pierce the soft soil with sticks and drop in seeds of sorghum or corn. The technique is a little different from what the ancient Egyptians did along the Nile.

As a professional cultural and wildlife photographer driven by my passion to record the impact of progress on sheltered cultures, I've spent much time in Africa over the past six years documenting both the people and the wildlife. My most recent foray was southern Ethiopia, photographing changes in the environment and culture of the Omo Valley tribes. Arriving in Addis Ababa from London on Ethiopia Airlines, I connected with my ground transport which would drive me to the Omo Valley. Though long and more than a tad bumpy, the drive allowed me to decompress from modern life, enjoy the ambience and beauty of Ethiopia, and settle into the rhythm of Africa.

On the tarmac road to Arba Minch, which is situated in the Great Rift Valley, we passed by tall thatch roofed huts fantastically painted in African style art with an ornate piece of pottery crowning its top. The local people were going about their daily lives in the village, working the fields, carrying large jerry cans of water, and creating pottery and handicrafts that will be sold in the local market. Sparse of private vehicles, the roads are used more for driving herds of livestock, public transport, and walking from the villages to town. We arrived in the evening as the sun began to descend and the road changed to dirt, stirring up the rich red African soil, creating a golden orange glow over the landscape.

We arose early to continue our journey south. As we approached the ridge overlooking the Omo Valley my guide and friend asked if I needed to make any final contact with the outside world as this was the last place to get a cell signal. This area has just begun to be touched by the modern world and is still free from cell towers, the internet and Facebook. As we descended into the valley by dirt roads, it was magic, as I began to see the beauty of these tribes in their traditional clothing of beaded skins and bright colours wandering through the unspoiled wilderness. Although these tribes live in close proximity to one another they are all unique with their own style and traditions.





As a photographer, I believe it is important to interact and gain the trust of those whose stories you are telling, especially when sensitive and complicated. So, rather than staying in nearby lodges I chose to camp in the villages of the tribes I was going to visit.

We first encountered the Mago National Park, home to the Mursi tribe, and known for the women who wear ornamental clay lip plates, elaborate headdresses and beautiful body paint. At a young age a girl's lower lip is cut by either her mother or another woman living in her village. The cut is held open by a wooden plug until the wound heals. It appears to be up to the individual girl to decide how far to stretch the lip, by inserting a progressively larger plug over several months. At the decision of the individual this plate can be as large as 12 centimetres in diameter. One claim is that the size of the lip plate is correlated with the size of a woman's bridewealth to be paid by her husband's family; the other is that the practice of cutting and stretching the lower lip originated as a deliberate disfigurement, designed to make women and girls less attractive to slave traders; either way, the Mursi continue to practice this tradition.

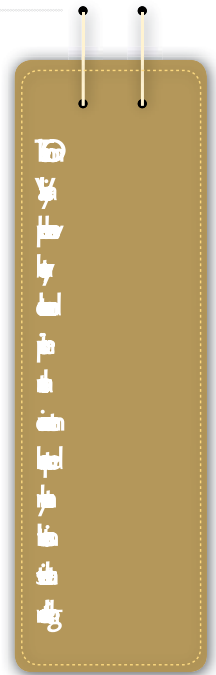
Surrounded by vegetation and large shade trees the village, like many settlements along the Omo, is a cluster of sun-bleached huts covered with dust; livestock pens and grain cribs, all set along the periphery. We were greeted by the chief and granted permission to pitch our tents under the tallest shade trees. The leisurely day was spent lying under the trees socialising with the elders and visiting the women in the village as they went about their daily chores. Late in the afternoon we gathered down by the river, a source of their livelihood, to capture the beauty of this tribe. While standing in the river, I took a wrong step and fell in with my gear. My guide and cook jumped in to rescue me and both took the plunge. Soaking wet, we began to laugh along with the Mursi tribe to whom we must have looked ridiculous. These are the moments where we discover our similarities, rather than our differences and a strong connection to those so different from our way of life was made with the commonality of laughter.

That evening we gathered around the fire, sharing stories. In the morning when I awoke just before sunrise I crawled from my tent to witness the warriors sitting around the fire that had watched over the village through the night and knew that I too had been protected.

We thanked the tribe for their hospitality, said good-bye, and continued our journey through the Omo Valley to Turmi, home of the Hamar Tribe. The women are striking; wearing beautiful colourful beaded skins, ornate necklaces, and metal bangles around their wrist and ankles. Those who wear the thick metal bangle with a small post around their necks are known to be the first wife. Famous for their hairstyle – a crown of long dreadlock-like braids covered in ochre – the Hamar women are the most decorated of the Omo people. While visiting the local weekly market we were invited to attend the Bull Jumping ceremony for which the tribe is most known.

The Bull Jumping ceremony is the rite of passage for a young boy, symbolising the childhood he is to leave behind, joining the ranks of the Maza (the other men who have recently and successfully jumped the bulls) and he will then be able to marry when he is ready. The ceremony starts several hours before the actual jumping of the bulls at sunset. It begins with the gathering of the tribe who make their way through the bush, dancing, singing, and blowing horns. The women from the jumper's village soon gather and purposefully provoke the Maza into lashing their bare backs with thin whip-like sticks that inflict raw, open wounds and scars them for life. The women do not even flinch as they are whipped and the scars are seen as the mark of a true Hamar woman.

The crowd then moves to a location where they find cover from the hot African sun under hand-built cabañas and coffee is served while they socialise. Soon it is time to move to the location where the jumping will take place. The bulls, castrated male cattle, are lined up in a north/south direction and held in place by the Maza. The young boy, naked, must transverse over the bulls without falling for a total of four passes. After the successful jumping of the bulls the ceremony continues for several days, feasting, drinking, and dancing.





Our final destination in the Omo Valley was Murulle, home to the Kara tribe and allies of the Hamar. We passed herdsmen driving animals through the bush before we arrived on the rim of a cliff overlooking the mighty Omo River where villagers were gliding downstream in lumpy hand-carved canoes. Depending on the season, the riverbanks are golden with the stubble of past harvests or sheathed in the moist green of new crops. The site was breathtaking and serene as we met with this beautiful tribe living in harmony with nature. It is here that the tribe will gather in the morning and drink coffee similar to our own morning rituals.

The Kara excel in face and body painting that is practiced daily in preparation of their dances and ceremonies. They pulverise locally found white chalk, yellow mineral rock, red iron ore and black charcoal to decorate their bodies, often mimicking the spotted plumage of a guinea fowl. The men create highly decorated clay hair buns, which can take up to three days to complete. Their ornate body scarring, where a cut is made with a knife and ash is rubbed into the wound to produce a raised welt, is also a known characteristic of the Kara. I spent several days with the Kara down along the banks of the Omo and found them to be the most friendly of the three tribes.

The Omo Valley is home to many tribes – the Bodi, Daasanach, Benna, Kara, Kwegu, Mursi, Surma, and Nyangatom, to name several of those better known. It is also home to one of the few remaining pristine riverine forests in semi-arid Africa. But drastic change is soon coming to this area – a massive hydroelectric dam is being built up river, new roads and bridges are under construction. Soon the modern world will begin to ascend upon this region forever changing the face of the Omo Valley. Powerful images can underscore the challenge faced by indigenous cultures coping with the effects of modern progress on their environment over an extended period of time. I'll be leading photo tours of the Omo Valley for the next several years with an aim to capture stories that reveal the strength and resilience of the Omo tribes.

The Omo Valley is a place whose beauty, culture and pristine natural environment has captured my heart. It contains stories that need telling and I will return. 🌈