

CULTURE CLASHES & CAMERAS

The Omo Valley in Ethiopia is an intriguing destination, one of Africa's last vestiges of tribal culture. But is the increasing obsession with photography ruining the experience for both tourists and tribes – not only here but across the continent? Sue Watt ponders the balance in “responsible” tourism.



“People need to respect the Hamar, or they won't respect us, however big our camera lenses and wallets might be.”



Under the shade of acacia trees, young women wearing goatskins, beads and cowry shells were dancing themselves into a frenzy. In the dusty afternoon heat, their backs glistened as they sang, accompanied by piercing bells clanging around their ankles and an incessant trumpeting of horns. Watching these women were around fifteen men, standing dispassionately with sticks in hand, ready to whip them.

Also watching in a semi-circle around the women were some seventy tourists, myself included, almost outnumbering the locals. In Ethiopia's remote Omo Valley, this is part of the Hamer tribe's famed and fascinating rite of passage known as running the bulls. For US\$20 each, tourists can attend and take photographs, the proceeds going to the family hosting the event and the local guides' association. Critics believe the whipping ceremony has become a cruel tourist sideshow that might have ceased were it not for its earning potential. Not all families invite visitors, however: many keep their celebrations private, yet still whip their women.

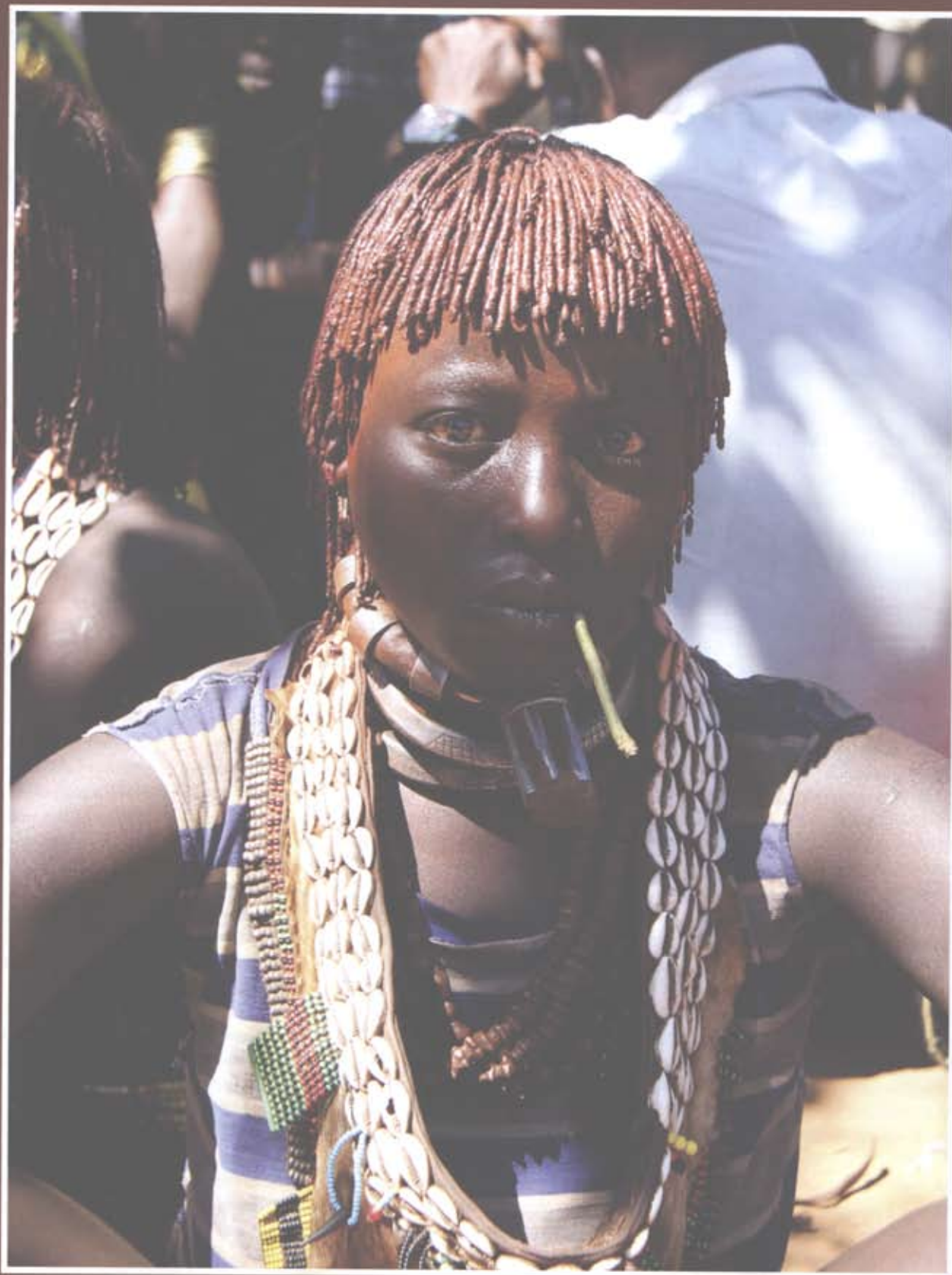
I watched as a beautiful teenage girl danced up to a man, goading him to whip her. He drew back his stick, its end as flexible as an elastic band, then swished it so fervently I could hear it cutting the air and sharply striking her back. She bled instantly and a wheal rose where he'd struck, but she stood silently without a flinch or shudder.

She was the sister of the young man who would shortly run naked several times across the backs of some 10-20 bulls, proving he'd reached manhood. Beforehand, his female relatives sing, dance, and voluntarily get whipped to show their devotion to him. Rubbing ash into their wounds to make the scars permanent, they wear their wheals as badges of honour, as symbols of their love and respect.

When it came to respecting others, however, a few *faranje* (Amharic for 'tourists') failed miserably that afternoon. Some members of a cultural photographic "safari" took photos wherever they wanted, impervious to social niceties or manners. One lady sat right among Hamer women, shooting images, invading their space. Others jostled for the best view within our semi-circle, using paparazzi-length lenses more suited to catwalk shoots, constantly looking at images they'd captured rather than at the unique experience unravelling before them.

We moved on to a celebration equivalent to our wedding feasts. Family and friends huddled under an enormous tree, drinking sorghum beer, singing and chatting. We tourists →

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK HARTLEY



MEETING (AND PHOTOGRAPHING) THE LOCALS

On a village visit anywhere in Africa, tourists want to leave with good images of tribal people and happy memories. Sue Watt's tips should help you do both. Whilst many of them should go without saying, her experiences prove otherwise.

- Engage with people through a local guide who will speak their language. Learn a few words to help break the ice.
- Always ask permission to take photographs of individuals. Showing them the photograph on the LED afterwards helps to break down the barriers between you.
- Main towns have internet access – if you say you're going to email them a photo, keep to your word and do so.
- If you're uncomfortable with paying for photos, leave your camera behind and simply enjoy meeting the people and witnessing their extraordinary way of life without a lens getting in the way.
- Payment for photos is per click, not per pose, and they count the clicks, wise to the cheats who say they've only taken one image. Pay them in clean notes – dirty, torn ones are difficult for them to use and may not be accepted.
- On village visits, move beyond the initial foray of people cluttering around the tour vehicle. People away from the crowd and within the village are often calmer, more friendly and in less of a rush to move on to the next punter.
- Most villages sell jewellery or gifts – buying something rather than just taking photos means you are contributing in a more positive way.
- Don't give pens or sweets to the children – it encourages begging, creates poor relationships, stops the children going to school and sweets damage their teeth. Contribute to a local school instead.
- At ceremonies remember you're a paying observer, not a paying guest, and don't invade their celebrations.
- Always respect the people and their customs – imagine how you would feel being constantly watched and photographed – and treat them as you would wish to be treated in such circumstances.

sat on their outskirts looking in. People were friendly, offering smiles and drinks. "This is the most authentic ceremony I've seen," my guide Temesgen explained. "Faranje aren't normally allowed at family celebrations."

Still some photographers behaved appallingly, sauntering among the crowd, leaning on their tree and hogging the shade, blithely taking close-up photographs. It was clear from the locals' expressions that they'd encroached too far.

Eventually, a Hamer lady marched up to one Western woman resting against the tree and blew a horn forcefully inches from her face, as if saying "Is this close enough for you?" The beautiful irony was sadly lost on the tourist concerned. "People need to respect the Hamer," Temesgen stated "or they won't respect us, however big our camera lenses and wallets might be."

Eight tribes, some 200,000 people, populate the Lower Omo Valley, each with unique, ancient cultures. With thatch and mud huts, bare-breasted women, and men with startling body scarification, its fascination lies in a perceived "real Africa" that has little contact with the outside world. But contact is rapidly increasing. New roads and decent lodges tempt more tourists than ever and make the experience far less arduous than my first trip here in 2004, when only a handful of travellers braved the journey. Today, cultural tours take visitors to tribal villages and markets including those of the Karo, Dassenach and Mursi, offering a truly fascinating glimpse into another world.

Numbering around 8000 living in and around Mago National Park, the Mursi are perhaps the best known of Omo's tribes, yet their way of life will soon change radically with the development of a new dam, Gibe III, and a vast sugarcane plantation. Famed for the clay lip-plates worn by women as a symbol of femininity and cultural belonging, Mursis are also renowned for their aggression, evident when they demand that tourists take their photos. For these, they charge five birr (30 pence) per person per photo, and unsurprisingly tensions arise as they compete for photographers' attentions.

Ten years ago, the Mursis we met were simply dressed, with goatskins, lip-plates and plain shell or metal jewellery. Now, however, they dress more to attract photographers in a competitive marketplace than to demonstrate authentic traditions. Arriving at Combili, a village of around 50 people, our 4x4 was instantly surrounded by women shouting "photo, photo" or "five birr", with lip-plates the size of saucers and/or extraordinarily elaborate headdresses of fruits, horns or wood. The scene is repeated in other villages too, particularly the Karo village of Kolcho.



It's an uneasy scenario for both tourist and tribe, a demeaning combination of beauty parade and business transaction that sadly inhibits genuine interaction, and it's reflected in the photos taken. No matter how exquisite the women's accessories, their eyes are invariably cold, even hostile. Akin to prostitution, you agree your price and pay for your moment together, but it's a soulless, impersonal moment lasting only as long as necessary to fulfil your deal. And there's an uncomfortable imbalance between the "haves" and "have-nots." Behind the camera, the rich faranje is anonymous, whilst the person being photographed is literally exposed, like an exhibit in a human zoo, posing reluctantly in an image that inevitably reveals their poverty and perceived "backwardness."

Tourist photography creates social problems too. As contact with the outside world increases, some tribes are abandoning their traditional lifestyles as agro-pastoralists to rely on tourist income, occasionally drinking their meagre profits in alcohol. And despite a national drive to increase education, children avoid school because they can earn money at home from faranje photographs.

In markets, faranje pay per person per photo, but general images of the scene can be taken without payment. At the frenetic Saturday market in Dimeka, brimming with Hamer and Bena people, we tried taking photos of chaotic stalls selling everything from goats and chickens to gourds and coffee. Should someone be at the forefront of that photo, however, or walk into shot, we were perceived as cheats, stealing their image and violating them, an inevitable consequence



ALL PICTURES: WILL WINTHROP

As with prostitution, you agree your price and pay for your moment together, but it's a soulless, impersonal moment lasting only as long as necessary to fulfil your deal

when money becomes the master of interaction.

We had far more rewarding encounters simply walking around town saying "Nagaya" (the Hamar expression for "hello") or having a drink in local bars, mostly receiving warm smiles and friendly responses, particularly in Turmi.

Here, in 2004, we visited a Hamar dance lit only by moonlight; a vibrant affair with men jumping to impress the girls whose passionate singing sent shivers down your spine. A naked little boy called Ayke chatted to me for ages, practicing his English and holding my hand. As we left, he smiled, pointed at me and then to his chest, and said simply: "You, good heart."

Ten years on, we showed his photo to some guys in a Turmi bar. One phone call and five minutes later, Ayke joined us, now sixteen, tall and good-looking, with the same warm smile. He loved the photos and kept them, a rare occasion where photography actually bonded rather than divided us.

"When I finish school, I'm going to be an engineer," he told us in perfect English. Despite his modern aspirations, he said he'd be running the bulls in two years' time and had already started to practice. 🐂

Sue Watt travelled to Ethiopia with grateful thanks to Dinknesh Tours (www.dinkneshethiopiatur.com) based in Addis Ababa. Tours to the Omo Valley take about 5-6 days.

FROM LEFT: The people business. A Hamar woman poses at the running of the bulls ceremony; a Karo boy, a Mursi child; a less intrusive visit to a village in Konso where there was mutual acceptance of the protocol.

⚖️ THE RIGHT BALANCE

The exchange can work, as Sue Watt found in Konso.

The Konso region is the gateway to South Omo. Its main town, Karat, is surrounded by 32 traditional villages encircled by distinctive basalt walls, home to the 300,000-strong Konso tribe. Famed for special agricultural techniques, ubiquitous stone terracing across the hillsides and unique community structures, eleven Konso villages gained UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 2011.

On a relaxed, two-hour walk with our guide Chuchu around Gamole village, we learnt about local life, from the *wagas* (wooden graveside statues for heroic men) to the *mora* (community gathering place) to the *olahitas* (impressive centuries-old generation poles). Chuchu explained how families lived, their system for resolving disputes and crimes, and their rites of passage that include raising a huge stone and throwing it over their heads. Children giggled at my pathetic attempt to lift it.

Both tourists and tribe were happy with the experience. Throughout,

people welcomed us taking their photographs, without pressure but with natural, warm smiles and payment of two birr. We had time to chat to locals, including a woman offering us sorghum beer at 9.30am – its smell alone seemed intoxicating.

What made this village visit so different? Guests pay US\$5 each and US\$10 for the guide, 80 per cent of which is distributed to the villages through Tourism Committees who decide how it should be spent. In Gamole, this was paying for new toilet blocks in a village with no sanitation, benefiting the whole community.

World Heritage Site status has dramatically increased tourist numbers here, from 8000 in 2010 to 14,000 in 2012, and has given credibility to the Konso culture. "Since UNESCO, people have changed," Chuchu explained. "Before, many were leaving the villages to live in the town, but now many want to stay; they're proud of their culture. Tourism has helped preserve their traditions."