
The River: Peoples and Histories of the Omo-Turkana Area

edited by

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Cover image: View of the Omo River from Kara Korcho, March 2008 (credit: M. Bassi)

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Ethnic groups in the tri-nation boundary region



In a ritual act, after a long journey, a Mursi man throws clay into the Omo River (credit: T. Clack)

Table of Contents

Foreword..... iii
Anthony, Lord St John of Bletso

Introduction..... v

Part 1: Prehistoric Life and Environment

1. Hominins and First Humans in the Lower Omo Valley.....1
Alex Wilshaw and Marta Mirazón Lahr

2. Early Prehistory of Fauna and Environment in Mursiland 11
Michelle Drapeau

3. The Middle Stone Age of the Omo Delta-Turkana Basin 16
Huw Groucutt

4. The Later Prehistory of the Turkana Basin 22
Alex Wilshaw and Marta Mirazón Lahr

Part 2: Pastoral Past – Entering History

5. Environment Histories - The Last 2,000 Years.....35
Graciela Gil-Romera and Miguel Sevilla-Callejo

6. Archaeology of Pastoralism and Monumentality in the Omo Valley 41
Marcus Brittain and Timothy Clack

7. Global Artefacts: The Pastoral Past in Museums 47
Juan Salazar Bonet and Timothy Clack

Part 3: Pastoral Presents – The Mursi

8. Who are the Mursi?.....55
David Turton and Lugulointheno Jordomo

9. Colour, Metaphor and Persons 65
Jean-Baptiste Eczet

10. Clay, Cosmology and Healing 71
Kate Fayers-Kerr

11. Nomadic Traditions of Cattle Beautification: The Mursi Example 76
Timothy Insoll and Timothy Clack

12. Material Culture	81
Juan Salazar Bonet	
13. Lip Plates	87
Shauna LaTosky	
14. Identity Ceremony: the Duel	92
Tamás Régi	
15. Local Economics: Cattle and Crops.....	97
Demerew Danye and Anastasia Novichkhina	
Part 4: Exceptional Diversity – Omo Cultures	
16. Omo Autonomies: On Populations, Tribes, and Ethnicity.....	104
Felix Girke	
17. Linguistic Diversity	113
Shiferaw Assefa and Marcus Brittain	
18. Sacrifice and Stone Platforms in Bodi	117
Lucie Buffavand and Timothy Clack	
19. The Hamar: Living By, For and With the Cattle.....	125
Jérôme Dubosson	
20. The Suri	133
Jon Abbink	
21. Kwegu: Hunters of the River	140
Lucie Buffavand	
Part 5: Finding the Omo – Threats and Impacts	
22. Written Past: Explorers’ Histories	149
Marco Bassi	
23. Last Chance to See? Intangible Heritage and Responsible Tourism.....	156
Tamás Régi and Timothy Clack	
24. ‘Our Poverty will be Gone’: Hope for a Mursi Community Conservation Area.....	161
Will Hurd	
25. From Marginalization to Megadam Crisis: The Dasanech and their Northern Turkana Neighbours	167
Claudia Carr	
Index	179
List of Contributors.....	183

Foreword

Ethiopia's diversity informs a political landscape that includes all forms of governance from egalitarianism to bicameral democracy and attempts to marry federalism and tribalism. The country's unique status as the only African nation without a history of colonialism, excepting a short-lived and contested Italian presence in some areas, has maintained a rich cultural mosaic that spans across the historical narratives of ancient Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Rastafari traditions, as well as a wide range of proud indigenous peoples.

Mentioned in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as the works of Herodotus, Ethiopia's extensive treasure trove includes the iconic, 'Iron Lion of Zion' made famous by Bob Marley, the rock hewn churches of Lalibela, and the Beta Israel homeland of Gondar. Some even contend that the lost Ark of the Covenant and the fabled mines of King Solomon are also to be found here. Yet despite offering up these forms of global heritage, and for that matter some exquisite examples of virtually every stage of human evolution in Africa, including the world-famous hominin 'Lucy', Ethiopia has so far safeguarded many illuminations from the ages. What is more, the remarkable ethnic patchwork to be found in Ethiopia has long attracted archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists, historians and others to the four corners, but their work of understanding is far from complete.

This volume is the first to explore one of the richest – culturally, linguistically, ethnically – environments in Ethiopia: the land of the Lower Omo Valley. This collection of short pieces, encouraged by local people as a means of communicating with national and international audiences, is also a celebration of the Omo River. Transformation is the nature of the modern world. The local communities and the environments they inhabit have changed in the past and continue to do so. From the deep time of human evolution to the symbolic and material resonances of the present, this book offers glimpses of some of the most fascinating time periods, cultures and places in the world. As this collection attests, as well as offering lifestyles to local people in ways that in some cases have endured for centuries, if not millennia, the Lower Omo continues to furnish scholars with significant revelations, and these resonate far beyond Ethiopia helping us all gain insight into humanity and the unknown.

The Lower Omo is the landscape of the first humans, an environment of riverine forests and savannahs, and a dynamic crossroads of cultures and languages. It is resplendent with unique material cultures, histories, traditions and relationships. This exceptional landscape is under threat presently from a battery of external interventions. The concomitant endangerment of people, lifeways, heritage and knowledge must – where possible and by those able – be mitigated. There is a role here for everyone: from the tourist, collector and aid worker to the researcher, investor and bureaucrat. Understanding the social and intellectual importance of this landscape is an important first step.



Anthony, Lord St John of Bletso

Introduction

The Omo-Turkana area is today home to a unique diversity of peoples and cultures. Spanning a large part of Ethiopia's southwestern highlands and northern Kenya, it is a landscape of flat grassland, scrubs and desert plains, interrupted by high ranges and scarred by deep recesses, all of which are moulded by freshwater flows dominated by the great Omo River that meanders southwards, draining into Lake Turkana.

The river and the lake were amongst the last in Africa to become known to Europeans, yet during the course of the last century the area has been a source of considerable interest to palaeontologists, archaeologists and anthropologists, the record from which, whether this covers four million years or focuses upon the present day, is of considerable global value. Rarely is such range and depth of insight from a singular geographic region brought together, however. We have therefore aimed here to provide an introduction to the many faces and facets of the people and environments that give life to the Omo-Turkana area, both in the present and in the past. The volume's many contributors are amongst the leading specialists presently working across the region, and although focused on many different aspects of its character, we believe that they



A view from the bank of
the Omo River in Mursi
(credit:
M. Sevilla-Callejo)

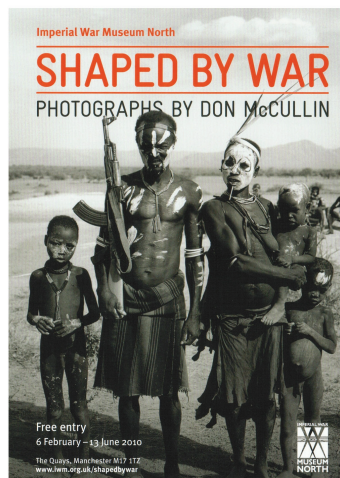


An archaeologist using surveying equipment (foreground) whilst a herder drives one of his cattle (credit: A. Arzoz)

share a common thread of concern that centres upon the diversity of the human condition – its origins, development, versatility and vulnerability.

The volume is formed of five sections. Palaeontological and archaeological studies comprise Parts 1 and 2, which are dedicated to the earliest developments of life in the area, from 3.5 million years ago, to a comparatively recent era recounted – often by competing narratives – in traditional oral histories by its present communities. The region has long been famed for its fossil record, sealed in sequences of sedimentary and volcanic deposits that provide conditions for accurate dating. In the 1960s, the first truly international team of researchers turned to the Omo River Valley, and systematic work into the evolutionary and cultural history of humankind and relative species has since continued almost unabated. This remarkable record of fossilised hominin and human biology is now accompanied by an increasingly detailed understanding of the changing environments and ecologies through which technological and behavioural innovation – much being revealed by the study of stone tools – took place. Working to scales of many millennia, and with some of the oldest evidence for anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*), small discoveries may have significant implications for the ways in which the collective history of our species is interpreted.

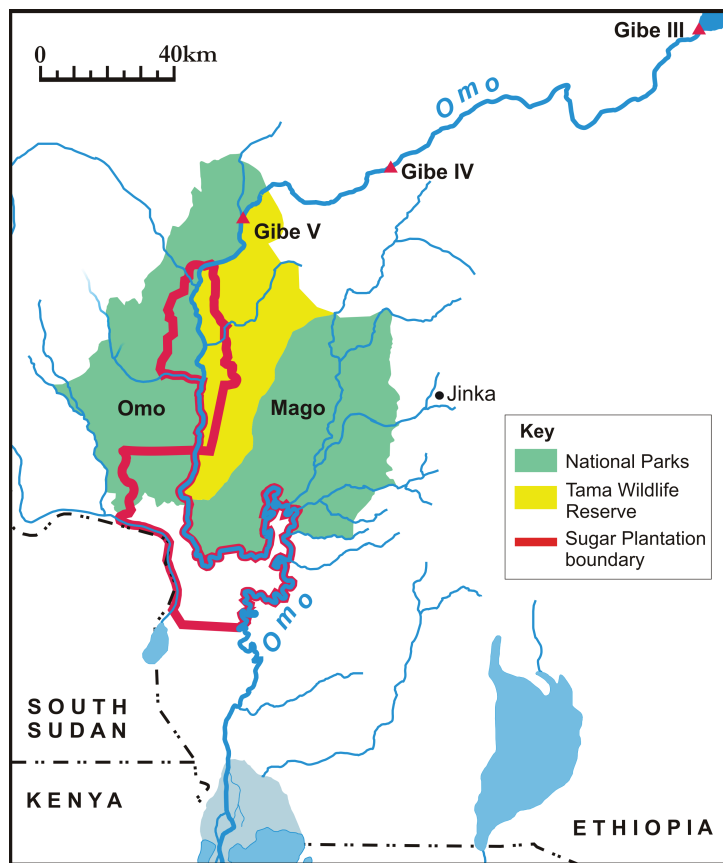
The later prehistory of the Omo-Turkana area is a rich endorsement of the vibrant range of subsistence strategies adopted by successive human inhabitants, and particularly foregrounds a series of megalithic traditions which, at different times, are either unique to the region or share similarities with groups elsewhere in north and



The Omo River and its environs have been of considerable popular interest in the West, underpinned primarily by notions of distance and the exotic. From right to left and top to bottom: front cover from *Antiquity* journal, 2015; front cover from *National Geographic Traveller*, 2011; promotional leaflet for an exhibition at Imperial War Museum North, 2010; and advert for Ethiopia Airlines, 1976

east Africa. These evince diverse forms of occupation and subsistence, from at least the Middle Stone Age into the present day, punctuated by population movements and blends of languages and identities, particularly through the crossroads of the Lower Omo Valley. Its reputation as an important centre of cultural contact is reflected by its representation in publications and museum displays, and especially by its status since 1980 as one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites, championed in its listing for being 'unlike any other place on Earth' in that 'so many different types of people have inhabited such a small area of land over many millennia.' (The full text is available here: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/17>).

The mix of cultural groups across the area as reflected by today's inhabitants is explored in Parts 3 and 4. Multiple groups occupy the landscape. A multitude of languages, ways of life, of material culture and bodily decoration, identify distinctions in group membership across the territories, whose relations are visibly complex and often in a state of unstable interdependence. Across the majority of these groups, cattle form the basis of their cultural and economic currency, where the seasons, horticulture pattern, rhythms of mobility, ceremony and community, to name but a few elements, permeate social discourse and identities. Part 3 focuses upon one of these groups, the Mursi, so to provide a more rounded basis of comparison to other neighbouring



Map of the Lower Omo Valley showing the location of dams (at different phases of construction), boundaries of the irrigation-fed sugar plantation, and designated national parks and wildlife reserve

groups, as introduced in Part 4. Encounters with the Bodi, Chai, Dasanetch, Hamar, Kara, Kwegu, Mursi, Nyangatom, Suri and Turkana will, we hope, offer prefatory insight to the dynamics of difference and interdependence that frame life in this small and unique geographical pocket.

Since the late nineteenth century, the Omo-Turkana area has attracted considerable interest from onlookers outside and beyond, particularly over the course of at least the last thirty years. Such interventions are the concern of Part 5, which opens with a background to the early explorers, hunters and scientists that entered the Omo Valley, especially noting their intentions and observations. Published in journal accounts, books and news reports, these accounts provide a recent history of contact with the region's ethnic groups, if not a history of the character of the groups themselves. These accounts constructed a popular image and understanding of the region and its communities, the legacy of which, along with quite fantastical representations of the ethnic 'Other' in numerous photo journals, has seen unprecedented

growth of 'ethno'-tourism. Similarly, 'eco'-tourism has been a feature of the Lower Omo Valley since the establishment in the 1970s and 1980s of two National Parks and a nature reserve, each purportedly conserving a natural wilderness 'unspoilt' by human intervention. These are amongst the many facets of global modernity and its impacts that 'local' groups such as the Mursi today face as a challenge to the long-term sustainability of their traditional ways of life. New communication technologies, as an example, may enable the region's groups to coordinate some means of autonomous solution, such as the formation of a Community Conservation Area, though other challenges lie ahead.

When fully operational the Gibe III dam will be third largest hydro-electric plant in Africa. Planned for completion in 2013, the project has been plagued by delay and controversy regarding its social and environmental impacts (credit: Creative Commons)



The rate of change in the Omo-Turkana area has undoubtedly accelerated in a short space of time. A considerable factor in this is an influx of development infrastructure. Large tracts of the Omo River have been given over to industrial plantations growing cotton and sugarcane, denying access to many of the inhabitant groups that are seasonally reliant upon cultivation of the nutritious soils along its banks. Greater still are Ethiopia's energy demands and its ambitions for hydro-power, of which only around 5% of its potential has been exploited. The construction of dams and power stations along the Omo River is an apparent solution, and Gibe III dam was inaugurated in 2016. The impact of its riverflow management combined with the plantation operations will be unprecedented; the outcome for communities across the region is uncertain, but the pace of change to the environment and a lack of clear-sighted mitigation strategies do not, sadly, present a promising outlook.



Construction work for an irrigation canal on the left back of the Omo River in Bodiland, November 2012

The volume's twenty-six authors offer first-hand glimpses into the area's cultures and environments, past and present. In face of new and compelling challenges, the need to engage with and gain an understanding of the wealth of heritage, culture and humanity in this unique location is imperative.

This volume is dedicated to the peoples – past, present and future – of the Lower Omo Valley and Lake Turkana Basin.

TC and MB, Oxford, October 2018

For online resources associated with the content of this volume please visit:

<http://in-africa.org/>
<https://mursi-archaeology.com>
<http://mursi.org>
<http://www.turkanabasin.org/>

Part 1: Prehistoric Life and Environment



A diverse array of bone harpoons from West Turkana, Kenya (credit: A. Wilshaw)