

TRIBES OF THE OMO

PHOTOGRAPHING A CULTURE IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE

Article and Photography
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Editor's Note: This article expands on the fauna, flora, and scenics traditionally showcased in the print editions of *Nature Photographer*. As humans we are as much a part of nature as the animals and plants with whom we share Mother Earth. We are excited to share with you Piper MacKay's images of the Omo Valley indigenous peoples who continue the ancestral way. These people live in rhythm with the Earth.

Dropping 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; the only African nation never to have been colonized. 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.

As a professional cultural and wildlife photographer, I'm 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 wildlife. So I keenly anticipated my most recent foray into southern Ethiopia to photograph the tribes and the land of the Omo Valley, capturing its centuries-long traditions that endure in the face of an ever-approaching modern world.

Arriving at a new destination is always exciting; so exciting that too many times our photographic instinct is to rush directly to our subjects and begin firing frames. But quick photographs often miss the deep experience of a place, culture, and environment. Taking the time to first experience what you photograph leads to more compelling images. So, rather than flying from Addis Abba

to the valley, my team drove. Though long and more than a tad bumpy in some areas, the drive allowed time 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 roof huts painted in wildly colorful African-style art crowned by an ornate piece of pottery. The villagers were going about their daily lives; working the fields, carrying large Jerry cans of water, and creating pottery and handicrafts for sale 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 bathed in the descending sun that painted the rich red African soil with 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 asked if I need to make any final contact with the outside world. This was the last place to get a cell signal—a not-so-subtle indication of the remoteness of the valley—happily free cell towers, the Internet and Facebook. Descending into the valley by dirt roads, I began to see the beauty of these people—dressed in their traditional

The golden glow of sunset along the road to Arba Minch, by Piper MacKay.



beaded skins and bright colors, and wandering through this unspoiled wilderness. Although the tribes live in close proximity, each has its own particular style and traditions.

Gaining the trust of your subjects is crucial to successful story telling. So, rather than staying in nearby lodges I chose to camp in the village of each tribe. It's a most effective way to interact and gain the trust of those whose stories you are telling especially when sensitive and complicated. When photographing indigenous cultures I try work out the logistics to arrive in a village at midday when the light is at its harshest. This trip I stayed true to this practice—taking time to greet the chief, share a semi cool beverage and spend a few hours wandering through the village slowly discovering the stories I will capture during the golden hours. This also gave me time to scout out the area, plan some of the backgrounds, and work out any potential lighting challenges in advance.

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. Surrounded by vegetation and large shade trees the Mursi village, like many settlements along the Omo, was a cluster of sun-bleached huts covered with dust; livestock pens and grain cribs, all set along the periphery.

Late in the afternoon we gathered down by the river, which I had scouted earlier in the day, to capture the beauty of this tribe. And as is so often the case with Africa, the unexpected happened. While standing in the river, I took a wrong step and fell in with my gear. Both my guide and cook jumped in to rescue me and both took the plunge. Soaking wet we

Portrait of a Mursi women with a lip plate, by Piper MacKay.



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 through the common trait of laughter. This is also why you must always bring a back up body and flash and hopefully you are not wearing both of them around your neck when you fall into a river. Lucky it was my Canon 7D and not my 5D Mark II full frame, which is my body of choice for photographing people.

When working in challenging and tough conditions situations like this and problems will happen. Gear gets dropped, broken, stolen etc. but you just need to keep your sense of humor, be prepared, and do not let it ruin the fantastic photographic opportunities of the moment. I did not have a back up flash (I do now) but did have and used my reflector. My 7D and flash did dry out but they did not work for about another 48 hours Without another body I would have been shooting with my point and shoot (always in my bag) and though I might have been moved to tears, I would have kept shooting, working with what I had.

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 who had watch over the village through the night. My flash was not working yet so, I quickly grabbed my headlamp and used it as best I could to add some much-needed light. Again a great illustration of working with what you have. This turned out to be one of my most compelling images from the trip.



Mursi Warriors sitting around the fire, predawn, after protecting the village throughout the night, by Piper MacKay.

TRIBES OF THE OMO

Thanking the tribe for their hospitality, we 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. Famous for their hairstyle—a crown of long dread lock like braids covered in ocar—the Hamer women are the most decorated of the Omo people. Photo possibilities galore quickly presented themselves.



Bangles worn by the Hamer women and beautiful beaded skins worn by the Hamer women, by Piper MacKay.



One of the more challenging problems when photographing in Africa is not being able to control your environment. For instance, the public markets throughout Africa are usually extremely lively, colorful and exciting, but are usually happening during midday in the harshest light because most villagers must walk several miles to get there. The way to best deal with this is remove the light by moving your subjects to shade, or creating your own. I always

carry a large white sheet for these type situations in case I cannot find any shade and I use it to make my own shade. The image of the two Hamer women with a child was taken about one in the afternoon. I found one hut in the midst of a very busy market and asked if I could photograph them in front of it and under the shade created by the overhang of the thatch roof. This is one of my most powerful images from the trip. Again work with what you have.



Portrait of 2 Hamer women with a baby, by Piper MacKay.

While visiting the market we were invited to go and attend the Bull Jumping ceremony, which the tribe is most known for. The Bull jumping ceremony is the rite of passage for a young boy symbolizing the childhood he leaves to join the ranks of the Maza (the other men who have recently and successfully jumped the bulls)—an important step towards marriage. The ceremony began

with the gathering of the tribe, which makes its way through the bush dancing, singing, and horns blowing. Having done extensive research about the tribes and their traditions I knew which directions the Maza would line up the cattle. This gave me an advantage to be in position to capture the moment the boy was in stride, jumping the bulls.



Young Hamar boy jumping the bulls, by Piper MacKay.

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.

The Kara excels in face and body painting and the craft is practiced daily in preparation of their dances and ceremonies. They pulverize 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.

Clay bun worn by the Kara warrior, by Piper MacKay.



My lens of choice was my Canon EF 16 -35mm 2.8 L. Getting in close creates a strong intimacy with the subject and allows for dramatic backgrounds. This is why I spend time with my subjects, making a connection and getting to know them before just putting a camera right into their face. Having this comfort level with your subject first is imperative to capturing relaxed natural expressions when working so close. When photographing the Kara tribe, the importance of the river is crucial to the story. I wanted to capture striking images so I needed to get into the river (several crocks were spotted on the banks as we arrived) and use a wide angle to work at eye level. I could have stayed along the bank and used a long zoom lens, but the photographs would not have been as strong, intimate, and unique.

The Omo Valley is home to many tribes—the Bodi, Daasanach, Benna, Kara, Kwegu, Mursi, Surma, and Nyangatom to name several of those more known. It's also home to one of the few remaining pristine riverside forests in semi-arid Africa.

Drastic change is coming though—dams, roads, bridges, and cell towers are under construction along the Omo River and future plans call for factories along its banks. An increase in tourism is almost certain. Recording these changes via powerful and personal images can help document the challenges faced by indigenous cultures trying to cope with the effects of modern progress on their environment. Over the next several years, I'll be leading photo tours of the Omo Valley with an aim to capture stories that reveal the strength and resilience of these tribes.

The Omo Valley is a place whose beauty, culture and pristine natural environment has captured my eyes and heart. It offers stories that need telling and I want to tell them.

To view more of my work on the tribes of the Omo, visit www.pipermackayphotography.com (click for live link). NP

Kara woman bathing in the mighty Omo River, by Piper Mackay.





Portrait of a Mursi child, by Piper MacKay.

Shooting Under the African Sun

- Bring at LEAST two camera bodies
- Do your research, find a good guide/fixer. It will make or break your trip
- Bring/Buy a universal powerbar with a plug that works in the country you are visiting and a converter box that works off the cigarette lighter.
- Two sources of storage and back up nightly when the village is quiet. Keep one in a different bag or area, similar to the idea of off sight storage.
- Bring a pillowcase to cover your camera from the dust when you are not using it.
- Cleaning supplies, Africa is very dusty and you will need to clean your gear and your sensor.
- Bring a flash and/or reflector to remove unflattering shadows or to even out the exposure between dark African skin and lighter surroundings
- Fast glass 2.8 image stabilized lenses
- Look behind you, something more interesting is probably happening right behind you.
- Have med Jet Asst <http://nedjetassist.com>
- Put your camera down and enjoy the experience.
- Have patients, a sense of humor, and remember “this is Africa” it works on African time.
- And last, try not to fall into the river. Staying hydrated is a good idea but this method is certainly hard on the gear.

Click to enjoy a slide presentation of additional “Tribes of the Omo” images
by

Piper MacKay

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