

Great Journeys: The Mursi

Brief Encounter

A dawn start and a long, bumpy ride along the barely-there roads leads Tewfic El-Sawy to the Mursi tribe in southwest Ethiopia. The people provide a fascinating - and highly enthusiastic - subject of his photography. But it's much too short a visit.

Splat! Splat! The insidious tsetse flies were no match for the whirling loincloths. With demonic grimaces, the three Mursi warriors, who materialized when we stopped our vehicle at the outskirts of their village, scattered the buzzing swarm in seconds.

The AK-47s dangling from their shoulders were menacing but, for a while at least, were harmless in comparison to the fleeing pests.

To photograph the notorious Mursi tribe, I drove more than three hours over the infamously rutted terrain of the Lower Omo Valley. Birhan, my driver and guide, and I traveled south from Jinka, a small town known for three things: tej, a potent home-made brew of fermented honey, a lumpy soccer pitch that occasionally serves as an airfield, and almost three hours of intermittent electricity every day. Driving along African landscapes of acacia woodland and thorny shrubbery since dawn, we weren't ready for this commotion. .

Preparing for my trip to Ethiopia, I had read that the Mursi are of Nilotic/Omoti origin, and their number estimated at 6000-8000. Pastoralists who roam the arid southwest corner of Ethiopia with their cattle in search of pasture and water, they are transhumant, as they move only twice a year between winter and summer camps, unlike nomads who move continuously. They have the reputation of being aggressive,



combative and mean but they are a fascinating tribe.

The Mursi are isolated people who live like their ancestors. The men do not work in the fields: a task left to the women. There are occasional hostilities among the tribes of the Lower Omo Valley, and the Mursi are sporadically in conflict over stolen cattle or violations of pasture rights. So it was with some trepidation that I decided to photograph them in their village.

After exchanging greetings and pleasantries, Birhan negotiated the price for my admission to the Mursi village. The conversation sounded amiable, although each glottal sentence was punctuated with streams of spit in my general direction. I take it as a sign of acceptance and that the negotiations were proceeding well.



The warriors had decorative scars on their upper arms and shoulders, indicating they had killed a large animal or an enemy in battle. Two of them have white chalk stripes painted over their bodies and the main negotiator has a tress of white animal hair on top of his head, which I initially mistook for a flywhisk. We walked towards the village -a collection of about 20 hard-baked mud huts covered in dry straw-like material, and thatched roofs made of branches and twigs. It seemed that everyone wanted to be photographed to get a share of the payment, and some tugged at my arms and sleeves for attention. Although I knew I'd see the famous Mursi women with clay disks inserted in their lower lips, I never realised that these would be so distended. When still young, an incision mark is made into the girls' lips, the lower front teeth are removed, and eventually a disc of baked clay is inserted in the incision. As the girls grow older, larger discs replace the smaller ones, further distending the lip. One of the anecdotal reasons for this disfigurement is that the size of the lip plate represents the wearers' family wealth, and indicates the bride's price.

Enfuto, enfuto!

Entering the fenced perimeter, I realised I must choose my subjects before the tugging increased. I was drawn by the calm demeanor of a tall young man, draped in a red patterned toga-like cloth, his placid face

daubed in chalk paint, his ears embellished by wooden earrings. I paired him off with a forceful looking woman, who had boldly thrust herself in front of the crowd.

I motioned them to stand near a hut, hoping to pose them as naturally as possible. I raised my camera, and the man immediately lowered his head and shut his eyes. I must have chosen a Mursi who still believes that looking directly into the lens of a camera will blind him.

After a few moments cajoling, I managed to photograph his face with his eyes half opened but looking to the side. This reassured him that he would not go blind, and gave me the opportunity to set them in a more natural pose. The woman gave me a hard time, too; she bickered with other women, who were perhaps jealous that she's being photographed. She frequently removed her lip plate to hiss at them and the lower lip dangles loosely, reminding me of a flaccid rubber band.



A few yards away, I noticed a young girl staring at us. She had an eye-catching headdress made of raffia-like material and red beads. I asked if she wanted to be photographed. Although she seemed a bit puzzled that I would want to photograph her, she nodded acceptance. Her lower lip was intact, so she was probably still under age for the traditional incision.

The other tribe members were becoming increasingly noisy and meddlesome. Birhan took a break from discussing local politics with the elders. He exhorted the crowd to move either backward or away from the scene. They obeyed him for a moment, but then return. Children, teenagers, and the elderly - the entire village wanted to share in the excitement. Only a handful of women ignored the commotion, busily grinding millet and sorghum into a paste and going about their daily chores.

The tufted warrior approached me, displaying his glossy white incisors as he gently tugs at my camera's lens; 'enfuto ...enfuto,' he said. He assumed a pseudo-hostile posture, flexed his biceps and majestically flaunted his headgear like a strutting rooster with its crest. His broad smile wrinkled the chalk stripes on his face, and

he froze the raffish grin until he heard the click of the shutter. He then tugged at my camera again, tilted it towards him and was puzzled that it didn't have a display on its back. I nodded my understanding, and gestured for him to wait until I switch over to my digital camera, and showed him the resulting image

He was giddy with pride and pulled my camera still around my neck, virtually throttling me, to show off his image to his friends. They clamoured for the same treatment and posed with their rifles dangling from their shoulders. One by one, they chortled on seeing their pictures and clapped enthusiastically at their own jokes.

I was elated by the brief encounter with the Mursi, and reluctant to heed Birhan's instructions that we had to leave for another tribe's village. He straightened the vehicle's side mirrors that the warriors had used to preen and adjust their headgear, and we departed in a large cloud of dust and exhaust smoke. The three warriors ran ahead of us clutching spears instead of guns, to ensure our safe passage. This time, there were no flies in sight.

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