

## culture

Inhabiting the remote and desolate region that is northwest Kenya, and usually left to their own resources, the people of Lake Turkana have always shown a remarkable ability to adapt. The recent Lake Turkana Festival highlighted the cultures of 10 ethnic tribes from the area while sending a warning signal to visitors about the challenges they now face. **Jill Craig** visited the Festival and spoke with several residents about their lives in this most fascinating of places

**W**hen I was eight years old, growing up on my family's farm in southern Ohio, my world did not extend much further than our sheep-grazing pastures, sweet corn-lined fields, and barn where my high-energy

grandfather would stand imposingly, barking orders to anyone within hopping range. But I remember clearly how my father's neatly catalogued National Geographic magazines, sitting quietly on our living room bookshelf, whispered to my imagination. The images of African ladies with side-shaven heads and swathed in colourful beads, the men with huge holes in their earlobes who washed their hair in mud and the little kids playing in red-brown dust made quite an impression on this farm girl.

Fast-forward 23 years, and I found myself talking to and

interacting with these same people at the recent Lake Turkana Festival, held in Loiyangalani. The German Embassy started this event in 2008 after a Turkana women's group submitted a proposal, requesting sponsorship for a cultural festival to bring people from the community together.

### The Challenges

It couldn't have happened at a better time. This remote area of Kenya is infamous for cattle rustling, drought, famine, and all other manner of natural and man-made disasters. Just last year, analysts proclaimed that East Africa was experiencing its worst drought in 50 years. Widespread famine ensued, and the "Kenya for Kenya" initiative was sparked. This enormous fundraising drive raised over KSH 677,000,000, with the bulk of contributions coming from Kenyans – individuals, corporations, nonprofits. Local Kenyan news reports were sprinkled with stories about housemaids and other low-paid workers even asking their

The (real) Land  
before  
Time

Dassanach perform their traditional dance.



employers to withhold a certain percentage of their income for the initiative. They wanted to donate, after seeing the video images of people quietly starving to death in the north of their own country.

The cattle rustling problem in this region is a big one. As Turkana Seline Locham told me, "The shifters [broad term for cattle rustlers, bandits] now have AK-47s, G3s, FN's...they send spies, they exchange bullets, kill people, raid homes. They even kill pregnant women." In other words, it is a deadly struggle for people to maintain their way of life.

But even though cattle rustling makes the headlines, for these mostly pastoralist communities, the struggle to find water points and grazing land is the biggest daily concern. With drought such a constant, people are always looking for new places in which to water their animals and find vegetation for them to eat. And when different groups converge upon the same point, trouble often breaks out.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Lake Turkana is the world's largest desert lake. It depends upon the Omo River, coming from Ethiopia, for the majority of its inflow. However, the Ethiopians are now constructing the Gibe III Dam, which will disturb Lake Turkana's water supply. Proponents claim that the benefits of hydropower will outweigh any consequences. If the project goes to completion, opponents fear that the dam will cause a substantial drop in the lake's water level and threaten the entire ecosystem. In other words, there is potential to cause great harm to the people.

And to top it off, oil was recently discovered around Lake Turkana. The curse of the black gold has affected so many countries on this continent – Sudan, Nigeria, and Angola, to name but a few – and it is not only the hyper-cynical who wonder if oil will actually improve the lives of those living here. The local people with whom I spoke overwhelmingly believe that it will help them, if the government puts in place proper policies and regulations.

## Resilience

Filing away this information, I was curious to find the heart of Turkana. These people live in one of the most remote areas of Kenya, infiltrated only by dust, rocks, and swarms of flies, in addition to vicious temperatures.

Even a government official acknowledged that northern Kenya has been consistently ignored throughout the years, making it necessary for the people to make their own way without depending upon any government assistance.

The heat alone renders you, the visitor, astounded by their ability to carve out a life there. I had at least two fleeting mirage moments where I considered whether sitting directly on the surface of the sun might provide a bit of a cool-down. Turkana is a place where you can jump into the lake, walk out, and be totally dry within 10 minutes. Somehow though, the people have adapted.

And it is precisely this ability to adapt that has allowed them to survive throughout the years. Resilience is the word that continued to be used throughout the festival, by guides, UN and government panelists, and the people themselves. They simply cannot be broken.

## The People

The people of Lake Turkana are stunning. In addition to the peoples' colourful beads, hair strewn with mud and long earlobes that I remembered from those National Geographic magazines, this time I noticed the ostrich feathers, striped red socks and dresses made of goat skin. I learned about special chairs used only by male village elders and a wrist knife used to skin goats. I was assured that the latter was (usually) not used as a weapon.

But allow me to clarify. There is not a single group of "Turkana people." Yes, there is the Turkana tribe, but there are also El Molo, Rendille, Samburu, Dassanach, Gabra, Borana, Konso, Wata, Burji and others. And although some tribes may share certain characteristics, they are all very different.

Our guide, a Rendille named Arok Galoro – who proudly sported his red Manchester

United T-shirt every day – tried to explain. My hand began to cramp as I furiously scribbled his comments. The El Molo are fishermen and they don't fight anyone. The Samburu and Rendille don't eat fish – they find it disgusting and their womenfolk are prone to making fun of the men who do. Samburu morans (warriors) are known for their long hair covered in red ochre. Neither Turkana men nor women undergo circumcision rites. The Dassanach are always looking north, where they believe God is found. They are also the sworn enemies of the Turkana. The Gabra are infamous for cutting the male parts from their enemies after killing them. A skit one evening even featured a "humorous" reenactment of this grim fact. Borana boys are not disciplined much, especially not by their mothers. The Konso have humorous traditional dances, to the great delight of their audiences. The Wata use pictures of animals, such as elephants and giraffes, in their dances – and can even feature a man running around like a chicken at the end. The Burji are known for their skilled weavers and

tasty homemade beer.

But this is just the beginning. The very beginning. Anthropologists spend years studying these groups, so I just aimed to do my best, given this dizzying amount of information.

## Case Study: The El Molo

Part of the official programme itinerary for the festival was a visit to a traditional El Molo village. Upon reviewing the brochure, I groaned in horror. In my brain were vacillating memories from a 2009 Tanzania trip, complete with obligatory visits to a "traditional" Maasai village. You know the ones. Where every person on a 25-seater bus is required to visit the hut on the side of the road, then after a very unauthentic cultural experience – where a few jumping Maasai are surrounded by a glut of tourists, wielding guide books, camera bags, and usually wearing safari hats that would make Crocodile Dundee cringe – you are asked to buy a few overpriced curios and pay for the

pictures you just took. Not my cup of tea.

To my surprise, the visit to the El Molo village was different. Partly because I made a beeline for the outskirts, just to help disguise the fact that I was an invading tourist with an SLR camera around my neck.

A fishing community, the people live in two small villages next to the southeastern side of the lake. They are purported to be the smallest tribe in Kenya, with a population of just over 1,000. Built by the women, their huts are made of doum palm fronds. Meanwhile, the men are responsible for catching the fish.

The El Molo are proud to tell you that they are the best swimmers in Kenya. Of course, they have to be, since they use only a thin paddling stick and raft consisting of three logs held together by rope to catch their fish for the day. My impromptu guides Phillip and Wilson told me unabashedly that they frequently fell off their rafts, so swimming skills were key.

Phillip Emamman had trained as a mechanic elsewhere, but due to scarce job opportunities, returned home to resume fishing. I'm not sure what Wilson Lekapana did for a living, but he was wearing a Rolling Stones T-shirt, inspiring me to address him as Mick Jagger for the rest of our village tour. He seemed to enjoy this.

We sat outside the hut of 21-year-old Susan Aemun and her two small daughters Jennifer and Jacklin. Phillip and Wilson pointed to the island across the water and told me that the tribe's shrines were located there. I inquired as to their purpose. The shrines are used to pray for rain and to help barren women become pregnant. In the case of the latter, the woman in question and her husband are rowed across the lake and ensconced in the shrine for a week. Village elders surround the shrine and pray for them to conceive. I found this entire ordeal a bit creepy. I asked Phillip and Wilson what would happen if no conception occurred. They were confused, so I repeated.

"Oh no!" Wilson exclaimed, "She will always get pregnant! Even if it takes one month, you will be sure she will get a child." I refrained from commenting on the awkwardness of staying in a shrine with your partner for a month – to accomplish one goal – as the village elders lurk outside.

The El Molo are also proud of the fact that they don't fight with anyone, or "go raiding." I suppose that when your numbers so small, it is probably best to get along with your neighbors.



Photographs: Jill Craig

El Molo dance performance.



Opposite page: Rendille perform during the festival. This page, top to bottom: A Samburu warrior watches over his camels; Gabra showcase their traditional dance.



of whom four are girls. Lakope was a bit morose as he informed me that none of the daughters have yet married.

### The Festival

Saturday afternoon in Loiyangalani was exciting. The various tribes came to erect their traditional huts on the grounds, to answer questions and to perform their cultural dances in front of several hundred spectators.

As I was busy snapping pictures like a crazed paparazzo at a Britney Spears meltdown sighting, I approached my current muse – a teenage Samburu moran draped in red cloth and colourful beads, with long, red-ochre covered hair– and showed him his photograph on my camera screen. Pausing momentarily from sending his friend a text message, he began laughing, and responded by snapping a photo of me on his cell phone. In reciprocal fashion, he showed me my photograph – my expression one of complete shock. Then, he, his friends, and I all started laughing.

On my way through the bandas (traditional homes) of the various tribes, I made a special point of visiting the hut of the Gabra.

My new Turkana friend Seline had made it clear to me that the Gabra fought with the Turkana, the Samburu, the Rendille, and the Dassanach. “Everyone,” she said. But I was especially intrigued by what Arok had told us. When the Gabra “raided,” they would kill a man and then cut off his private parts in order to impress the ladies at home and fetch a bride. Surely this can’t be true, I thought, so I set out to investigate.

My host was 41-year-old Simon Dabello, who slightly resembled Snoop Dogg, the American rapper. He informed me that the Gabra had to fight with everyone because they were surrounded on all sides and therefore could not avoid conflict over grazing and water points.

Then I asked about the cutting issue. A sly grin slowly spread across his face, and he proudly told me that yes, it was true. Until about 10 years ago – yes, that’s correct, only 2002 – the Gabra were still cutting off the male parts of enemies after killing them in battle. The warrior would then bring this trophy to his uncle, who would exchange the “present” for a female camel. The women of the village would dance and sing in honour of the new camel-owner, and the man then

had his pick of the women for a bride. Simon was a bit whimsical as he added, “but then the NGOs told us we had to stop.” Well, I suppose that to all good things must come an end.

### The Future

The peoples of Lake Turkana are indeed resilient. And proud. When I asked Seline how she felt about the “Kenans for Kenya” effort last year, she responded, “We are very thankful for people to give us money. Very thankful. But we don’t want to beg. We want to have training to learn how to farm. We want to learn how to do it ourselves. We just don’t know how...”

The Turkana people will survive. They are the textbook example of how to do so, in the toughest of circumstances. But with huge changes on the horizon, like oil drilling on their lands and a dam threatening to harm their livelihoods, there must be consideration for how to preserve these cultures while still raising the standard of living for everyone. Without these precautions, the images that I, and so many others, remember with such clarity from National Geographic could disappear forever. **D**

### Meeting with the Witch Doctors

Outside the sparsely fashioned Desert Museum, I met with Lakope and Nabenyo Longori, a Turkana couple showcasing their traditional garb to the visitors. Lakope told me that he was a witch doctor, or nkatio. The green and black beads they wore signified this classification. When people in the village brought forth their chest, leg and stomach problems, the Longoris would soak mountain herbs for four days and then administer to the patient. Lakope also proudly informed me that he knew the correct herbs to give barren women to help them to conceive.

But then I learned something even more interesting. He informed me that the Turkana are the only tribe that prefers having daughters rather than sons. This is only for economic reasons, he said. Apparently, a girl’s dowry is in factors of 100 – 100 camels, 100 sheep, 100 donkeys, etc. So her family stands to gain a fair bit upon her marriage. In the old days, Lakope told me, this obligation was paid up front. Due to the drought, the young man may now pay on an installment plan. The Longoris have seven children,



**The Turkana people will survive. They are the textbook example of how to do so, in the toughest of circumstances**

