

The last EI Molo



eric lafforgue



The El Molo live around Lake Turkana, the largest desert lake in the world. The El-Molo are the smallest ethnic group in Kenya, numbering only 200 pureblooded people. They are the shortest and poorest of Kenya's ethnic groups.



They have always been a peaceful, quiet, and non-violent - unlike their neighbors. They are against killing people and raiding for cattle. They are now gathered into two villages, Anderi and Illah, with 200 and 100 inhabitants respectively.



The El-Molo still live in small igloo-shaped huts made of acacias and palm trees, built on the shore of Lake Turkana. These are slowly being replaced by concrete homes.



Their net fishing technique is 3000 years old. The lunar cycle dictates when they go net fishing. They use small rafts made of 3 palm tree trunks, and handmade harpoons. Modern boats and equipment are too expensive for them.



Their diet is largely composed of fish. Occasionally they eat turtles and crocodiles from the lake. Their environment is too arid to raise cattle. They don't eat any fruits or vegetables either since the region is too dry to grow food and they are too far from any marketplace. The main local fish are catfish, tilapia, and Nile perch (up to 2 meters long and 200 kg for one fish!)



Until recently, the El Molo didn't have any fresh water. The government then set up water tanks for them, but they still drink the salt water from the lake. The water is potable, but not palatable.



Before, the El Molo hunted hippos. The hippo hunter used to be celebrated as a hero. Today, since the hippo is protected, hunting it is prohibited. The chief says, "the best bit is the filet". The hippo is for El Molo what the lions are to Maasai!



The El Molo sometimes eat crocodile meat, especially when they are entertaining guests. There are 10,000 crocodiles in the lake and accidents still happen when the El Molo men go fishing.



Salty alkaline water from the lake, malnutrition, and unbalanced protein-rich diets result in an array of health issues for the El Molo. There are many with bone deformities, even children.



Some adults are unable to walk because of painful bones. Many in the village have dental diseases and infirmities.



Many have strabismus.



The winds are very strong in the region. The El Molo remove the dust from the eye of a friend by blowing into it.



Until recently, the tribe has always intermarried. This may have contributed to their recessive genes, which expose them to disease and early aging. They also suffer from a high fluoride intake, which causes discoloring of teeth.



In one of the hottest places on earth, many people suffer from the sun. Temperatures can reach up to 50 Celsius.



Their brown colored hair reveals their dietary deficiencies.



They live at most to 45 years of age. 40 is considered old in the tribe as a 40 year-old can look 70.



They were monogamous even before Christianity arrived. They also keep long lapses between childbirth since women breastfeed until the child is independent. It is a natural contraception. They limit the births because of the scarcity of food.



The El Molo wear necklaces and bracelets made of colored beads. Nowadays, only the elders dress in a traditional way.



As they live close to the water and are often wet, the El Molo people never developed body painting practices.



100 El Molo kids go to school, sometimes just to have lunch.



They all became christians in the 60s when the missionaries arrived. This protected them from the pastoralist enemy tribes who were constantly invading them.



They combine their ancestral traditions with their new religious beliefs. For example, an El Molo woman will wear a tribal necklace and a cross simultaneously.



The El Molo language is now extinct. The last man to speak it died in 1974. They had 8 words just for the wind. Researchers trying to rebuild the language have recorded 600 words.



An El Molo girl whose parents are El Molo and Turkana. Intermarriage with other tribes was formerly forbidden in the El Molo culture, but the El Molo population was so endangered that the government encouraged them to marry with the Turkana, Samburu and Rendille tribes (formerly their enemies). In the old times, the Samburu and Gabbra used to raid and kidnap small girls to raise and marry.



Fish catches are always decreasing. The El Molo are too poor to buy some cereals, and live too far for fruits and vegetables. Malnutrition is still major problem and they live under constant threat of hunger.



Since the construction of the Gibbe Dam in Ethiopia, Lake Turkana does not receive enough water, so the salt level increases. Some say the Lake will become the “Aral Sea of East Africa”.

lafforgue@mac.com
www.ericlafforgue.com

