



BORANAS

the keepers of the singing wells

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The Borana ethnic group lives in Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia. Their population is estimated to be 500,000. They are semi-pastoralists, and live in arid areas. The word "Borana" means « kind person ». Their lives revolve around their animals: camels, cows, sheep, goats, and donkeys. Livestock are their only wealth and are used in religious sacrifices or to pay for a bride or legal fines. But animals need to graze, so the Borana often have to move to find the best grazing lands...



The Borana still use the Gada, a hierarchical and political system that divides the Borana community into different age-sets. A new “father of the village” is elected every 8 years. Mr Doyo on the picture is wearing a kalacha, a phallus-shaped ornament, on his forehead.



The man who will enter the gada has his hair shaved by his elder wives. The hair is buried outside the entrance of the cattle house.

During these ceremonies the man wears a kalacha on his forehead, attached with a leather strap. It is a pointed piece of metal and when not being worn it is kept in a milk gourd.

The kalacha protects all who touch it.

The man who wears the kalacha must always stay calm and not speak loudly. He is a wise man.



As the son of a chief, this boy has a unique life. The children who at birth are placed in the first grade (daballe) keep a long hairstyle. They look like girls, and are in fact addressed as *intal* (girl).

They cannot be punished, and their mothers hold a special place in society as many come to bless them.

Married men carry the « ororo » stick. They never leave it! Those men are called "abba worra" (the head of the family). They are usually dressed in white too.





According to Borana tradition, when a girl is born, the top of her head is kept shaven until she gets married. A look known as the "gubbe".

Once she gets married, she will then fleet her hair.

This will help in identifying her as a married woman and she will not have the gubbe any longer.



A boy of a chief exists publicly only after he has been named. Before that, even his death would be mourned privately.

Children's first names are usually a term relating to the time of day when they were born: Guyo is the name of a boy born in broad daylight.

Some are named after a major event; a ceremony (Jil), a rainy season (Rob) or a dry season (Bon).

Others are named after week days while a few get odd names such as Jaldes (ape), Funnan (nose), Gufu (trees-stump) and Luke (lanky long legs).



When a child is born, it must be given some milk. This is done to demonstrate the importance of cow milk. If the child is a boy, a piece of cow-hide is hung above the door of the hut.

After birth, the mother takes the remnants of the umbilical cord and places it on a sheep which will become the property of the child.



In a subgroup of the Borana known as the Gabbra, newborn children are welcomed with dances performed by women.



There are strong rules and taboos in Borana tribe. Children must never address anybody older than themselves by their names.



Cattle and camels occupy a very important place in the lives of the Borana. A man's wealth is determined by the number of livestock he has. Many have over one thousand animals. Anyone with less than twenty heads of cattle is considered impoverished. His fellow clansmen will loan him livestock, but remain entitled to the animal's milk.



Borana houses, built by women, are made to be temporary. A Borana may move up to four times a year, in search of better pastures. When movement of the homestead is required, the transportable portions are loaded onto camels or donkeys and carried to the new location.



A Borana woman with an axe goes to cut some wood to build a new house.



Women use their teeth to prepare the branches that will be made into ropes. Within a few hours they can put up or take down a whole village of about 20 huts. Nowadays, some Borana have given up the nomadic lifestyle for permanent housing. No man will ever be seen helping women with constructing or deconstructing a hut. To do so is considered undignified.



A wife decides who will enter in the house. If her husband comes back and finds another man's spear stuck in the ground outside her house, he cannot go in.



Containers for keeping milk fresh hang on the walls. They are the only decoration inside the houses.



The Borana cook the coffee beans in butter. They pray before drinking it, asking the rain to come. These people depend on milk for survival. Scientists say the butter's high fat content will slow the time it takes for your body to metabolize the coffee's caffeine. In other words, increased energy, decreased crash.



A girl grows up under the strict guidance of her mother. She is taught how to sterilize gourds for milk. She makes beds and often feeds guests. She also helps her mother in collecting water and firewood. Such teaching is very important because a man looking for a wife always judges a girl by her mother.



the old people are afraid of having their picture taken: they believe that when you take their picture, you remove their blood and steal their shadow.



This Borana girl is a student in the town of Marsabit.

She comes back to her village on the weekends. The elders are complaining as money becomes more and more important in the Borana society and young people want to take care of the cattle less and less.



Islam has influenced their society, but they believe traditionally in one God called Wak. For them, all good things originate from Wak, especially rain. A man will have to pay 3 camels and few goats to marry a woman in the remote Kenyan area.



Because of their nomadic lifestyle, they had little contact with Christian missionaries and consequently only 10% of the Borana may be Christians.



All the clans own some wells which are vital in the Borana's arid areas. Nobody knows when they were built, some may be there for centuries. Some wells are 30 meters deep
You must always ask before taking water, even though it is free.



The wells are called the singing wells: the young, strong men (the totus) carry the water from the well (the "argula") to the top where people and animals wait their turn. The songs are usually about the cattle. Singing is a way to keep the good tempo in the chain.



In peace time, the water will be offered to everybody. In time of war, it becomes a strategic thing. Each well has a name like "the well of the root" or "the well of the empty trunk". Most importantly, these wells never dry up, even in the event of severe droughts.



There is a specific hierarchy for access to the water: priority is given to the horses, then the calves, then women, then cows, and finally the camels. Goats and sheep can access the water anytime.



Each water well has a keeper called the "Bairiga". He does not earn money for this role since water is needed by every living creature. Sometimes people offer him clothes or little animals to thank him for taking care of the well.



Conflicts over water are forbidden. If someone starts a fight, he will have to sacrifice one cow or risk being banned from the wells which is virtually a death penalty in the community!



As the climate is changing, the Borana are forced to sell their animals before they die. This is not in accordance with their tradition. They have also been increasingly dependent upon relief agencies for help, which is culturally repugnant to these proud people.



A Borana clan near Moyale, Kenya; they all move together to find better pastures for the animals. They walked more than 100 km. A strict role differentiation exists between men and women: men are in charge of the herds while women are responsible for the children and the everyday life.



Traditionally, Borana attire was made from goat and sheepskins. Three sheep were needed to make a complete garment for a woman. Now they wear the hides just for special occasions.



The chief's wife wears a special ornament made of leather and, as of recently, of coca cola caps.



The Borana call these decorations “Kallo”. Only the wives of prominent men wear those calabashes on celebration days.



El Sod in south Ethiopia was formerly a volcano but only a crater lake remains. It takes 45 minutes to reach by foot from the nearest road. In the green waters, the Borana pull out some black mud which contains salt.





The men work totally nude, even if they are Muslim. The salt will be given both to animals and people.

The salt irritates the skin, the eyes, and the whole body as they have to dive to take the mud. It's quite a sight to see in the 21st century.





To climb up the crater, it takes more than an hour under a very hot sun. Once the men have finished to filling up their bags, each weighing 25 kg, they put 2 on each of their donkeys and return to their village.

They do this up to three times a day. The Borana do not eat donkeys, as they say they are too close to human beings.



Until the 70s it was forbidden by custom to raise daughters for period of five years. Because of this, all Borana nomads were forced to give up their daughters for adoption to the Waata tribes. Nowadays, that culture has changed.



When couples get married, there is no exchanging of rings just like in our traditions.

Instead, a man uses a ring only when he has killed wild animals like lions. Boranas designate him as a hero.



The mother-in law and the son-in law will never see each other face to face. If they want to talk to each other, they must do so without exposing their faces. They can hide behind walls of a house. If they accidentally cross on the road, they would to have to cover their faces until they passed each other.



HIV/AIDS poses a serious threat to the Borana. More and more truck drivers use the Addis Ababa - Kenya highway, which goes through the Borana area. Borana culture encourages promiscuity. A married woman is expected to take at least one lover, and is encouraged to do so by her husband. Such practice is considered as a mark of desirability and proof of fulfilled gender roles.

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