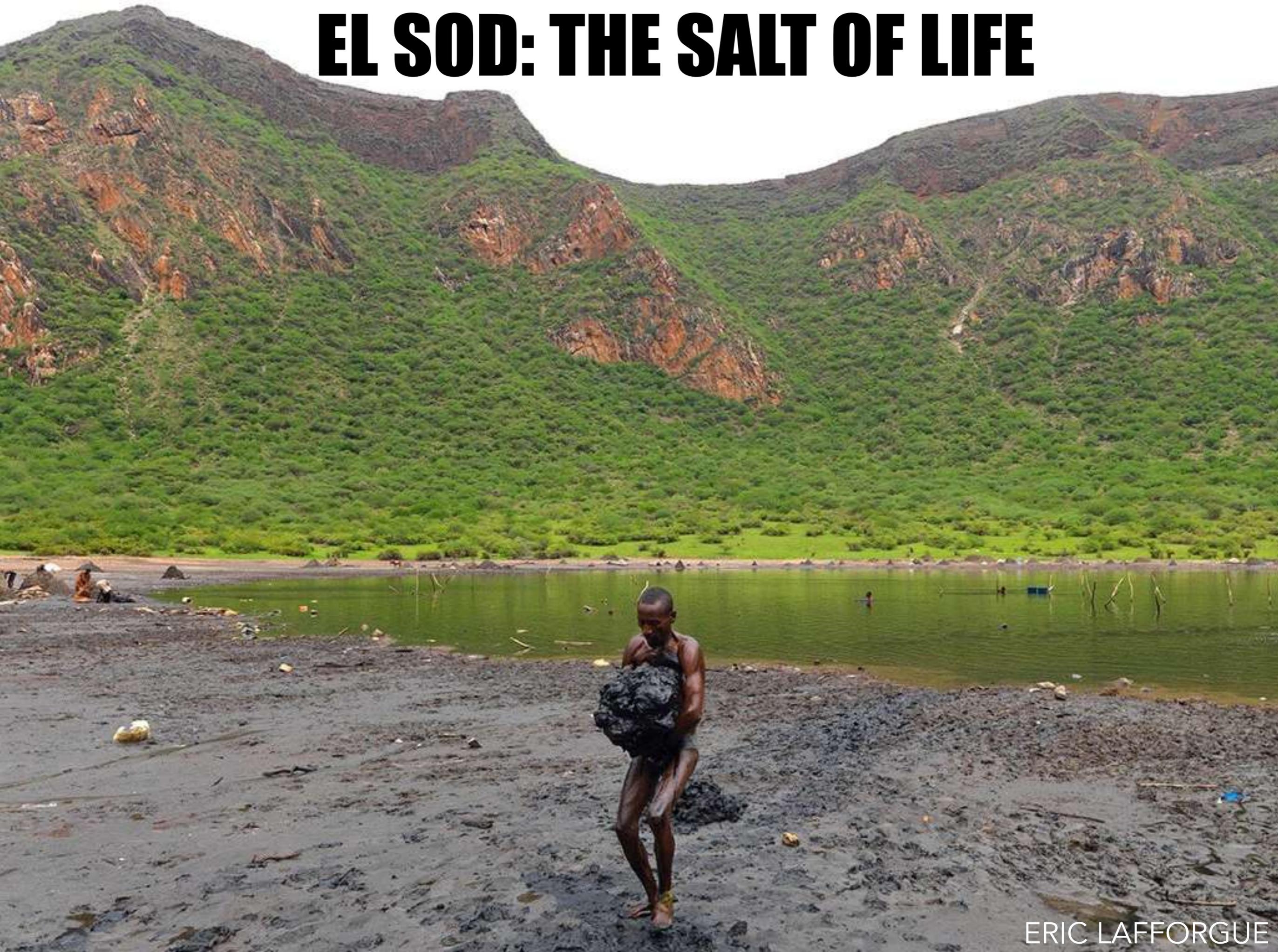


EL SOD: THE SALT OF LIFE





El Sod, the House Of Salt, is a village located 90 km away from Yabelo, the capital of Borana people in South Ethiopia. It stands on the edge of an extinct volcano with a diameter of 1.8 km and a salt lake in the crater. For centuries, men dive into the lake to collect the salt and sell it across Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya.



It takes 1 hour to go down the 2.5 km narrow path, from the village to the lake 340 meters downhill. The best view on the crater can be spotted from the recently built mosque.



Every miner works as a freelancer, independent from any company or boss. They dive to make a living. Most of the time divers are naked, the salt water is being so corrosive that it destroys everything, including clothes and shoes.



Miners try to protect their nose and ears with plugs made of soil wrapped in plastic bags. There's no protection for the eyes: many suffer heavily from blindness.



When the weather is good after rains (Borana wait for it for months since the area suffers from drought) , more than 200 men dive into the lake. More and more children are joining so as to get some extra revenue for their families. The parents are aware of the dangers but they don't have any choice if they want to survive.



Early morning, the first divers enter the lake with long wooden sticks.

They use the sticks to break the bottom of the lake; then they dive along them in the shallow water, collect the black mud full of salt, and bring it back on the bank.



From the sky the lake looks like a tropical lagoon. But back on the ground the smell is pestilential, the sticky mud and the dark water are just like oil. Paradise turns into hell.



According to some of the men, they can make 3 trips in a single day. It takes them 30 minutes to hike down (at least double for tourists), 1 hour to collect the salt, then another 1 hour to climb up back to the village with loaded donkeys. Some of them work from sunrise to sunset.



More and more Boranas being muslims, they tend to wear underwear.



From the sky you can clearly see the salt pyramids. Under the scorching hot sun, the salt in the crater dries in no time at all due to the lack of wind.



Most of the time, divers work in pairs. This is a good way to avoid accidents in case anyone diving along the wooden sticks got stuck inside the lake.



Three kinds of salt can be found in the lake: the black salt for animals, the white salt for the people, and crystals which can be sold at a high price.



Kabich is 25. He has been diving for 9 years. He will retire in one year due to the pain caused by the salt on his ears, nose and eyes: he is also nearly deaf. He earns 8 euros each time he brings back a loaded donkey to the village. A good salary for Ethiopia but at the cost of great pain and efforts.



The skin itches severely when out of the lake. The salt causes lots of wounds and infections all over the body. As soon the diver is under the sun, he becomes a salt statue. The fresh water is precious : they can take a shower only once a day.



Diving is the only possible job in such a harsh environment. Owning cattle requires a lot of money. Kabich is working so hard - putting his health in danger, to earn money thus enabling his kids to study and get decent jobs.



Only Borana people get access to the salt in the volcano. Conflicts raise whenever another tribe tries to enter the area.



Women do not take part in the salt extraction. Few of them go down in the crater to collect wood and branches for the cattle. As men are most of the time naked, plus some are muslims, they also prefer to stay away. Usually women are dedicated to the hardest tasks in the Borana culture. This is an exception.

Once the donkeys are loaded with 2x25kg of salt in each bag, they have to climb up to the village on the edge of the volcano. Under the sun, the rocks are turning into an oven, making the way back a hell. Some miners even collapse after such efforts.

There is no room for industrialisation: Borana are against it, they are rather willing to carry on this tradition as source of small revenues, and part of their culture.



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