



TURKANA

beauty in hell

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No human should be able to live in these conditions and yet 250,000 Turkana people are living here. Their territory extends to northern Kenya around Lake Turkana, and on the boundaries with south Sudan and Ethiopia. In 1975, the lake (400 km long, 60 large) was named after them.



The Lake Turkana region presents a lunar landscape, covered in black volcanic rocks. It's an extremely inhospitable environment for humans. There is no potable water and limited pastures. The rainfall averages is less than 6 inches a year. During the day the high temperatures (up to 45°C) are come with strong winds (up to 11 meters per second), pushing dust.



The Turkana live in small households. Inside live of a man, his wives (as he can marry more than one), their children and sometimes some dependent old people. The house is called « awi ». It is built with wood, animal skin, and doum palm leaves. Only the women build the houses!



Turkana girls and women love to adorn themselves with a lot of necklaces. Beads can be made of glass, seeds, cowry shells, or iron. They never remove them! This can only happen when they are ill or during a mourning time. It means they sleep with those huge necklaces... By the quantity and style of jewelry a woman wears, you can guess her social status.



Nakaparaparal are the famous ear ornaments. They are made by the men of the tribe in aluminium most of the time and look like a leaf.

Beads colors have specific meaning. Yellow and red beads are given to girl by a man when they are fiancé. If a woman wears only white beads, it means she is a widow. A woman who cannot move her neck is envied! The big necklaces are heavy, like 5 kilos.





A married Turkana woman will also wear a plain metal ring around the neck. This is a kind of wedding ring (alagama). A Turkana man will do all he can to make sure that his women folk are dressed in beads of class. Even if some are not able to take their girls to school, they will still ensure that they have beads.

The traditional skirt called « abuo » is usually made from tanned goat skins. The brown color is the most seen.





Turkana women put grease paint on their bodies which is made from mixing animal fat with red ochre and the leaves of a tree to have nice perfume. They say it is good for the skin and it protects from the insects. Women also put animal fat all around their neck and also on their huge necklaces to prevent from skin irritation.



The Turkana enjoyed to have labrets, but nowadays, only the elders can be seen with on. They used to put an ivory lip plug, then a wood one, and for some years, they use a lip plug made of copper or even with plaited electric wires. The hole between the lower lip and chin is pierced using a thorn. The is useful to spit through the gap of the teeth, without even opening the mouth.



Women become adult when they reach puberty. Unlike many other tribes in Kenya, the Turkana do not practice FGM and circumcision.



Scarifications on the belly are made by traditional doctors to cure ill people: it is a way to put out the illness from the body. Scarification is practiced for aesthetic reasons too. Scars are a sign of beauty or to show how many people he has killed, if he is a man.



Herding is a family affair. The father assigns various tasks to his children depending on their age. It's common to see kids walking long distances with the cattle. Later they will take care of sheep and goats. The girls carry water and collect wood.



To become a man, the turkana teen must go through a ceremony where he will have to kill an animal with a spear, but he must kill it in one throw! Once done, the old men will open the stomach of the animal and put the content on the body of the new adult. It is the way they bless him.

Men love to make an elaborate mudpack hairstyle called « emedot ». It is a kind of chignon: the hairstyle takes the shape of a large bun of hair at the back of the head.





Men use a wood pillow (ekicolong) to sleep on it and protect elaborate mudpack coiffures.



Turkana men love to decorate themselves with ostrich feathers to show they are elders or warriors. 2 ostrich feathers costs 1 goat.



Four million years ago, the Lake Turkana basin may have been the cradle of mankind. You can spot some very nice engraving sites showing a mixture of giraffes and geometric patterns made around 2000 years ago close to the lake.



The Turkana follow their traditional religion. There's one supreme God called Akuj, who is associated with the sky. If God is happy, he will give rain. But if he is angry with the people, he will punish them. In the old believings, giraffes were supposed to tickle the clouds with their high heads, and make the rain come !



Dances and songs are important in the social life. Dances allow the people to meet and to flirt. Circle dances are performed by group of young unmarried girls.



The men and young girls join hands and the circles move around. The men may then jump into the centre of the circle raising their arms to imitate the cow horns.



Deviners, called the « emuron » are able to interpret or predict Akuj's plans through the tossing of ...sandals ! Sandals are very important for the oracle. He blesses the sandals by spitting on them. He throws them up into the air and gives a meaning to the patterns they create when they fall on the ground.



Donkeys have a special status in Turkana tribe: the people do not drink its milk. They use them to carry their houses when they move or weak people with a special wood saddle. But even if donkeys are very useful, they are mocked by the turkana people. Donkey meat is eaten only in the Turkana, where it is savored as a delicacy while others tribe hate it!



Camels are used for transportation of goods and are well adapted to the very arid climate of Turkana and the lack of water. They are also used in transactions for weddings, or economics deals.

The finger hook called « corogat » is used as a weapon, for gouging out an enemy's eye ! It is also used to remove lower incisors in childhood.





Lower incisors are removed in childhood. The origin of this practice was against tetanus, as people are lock-jawed, so they can feed them with milk through the hole.



The Turkana have the highest instance in the world of echinococcus (7%) due to their proximity with dogs, who live and defecate everywhere. The dogs lick up blood and vomit and the women use the dog's excrement as a lubricant for the necklaces that touch their neck. The disease causes huge cysts that can be removed by surgery. The locals believe that this "disease of the large belly" is due to a spell cast by the neighboring enemy tribe: the Toposa.



Both men and women use the branch of a tree called esekon to clean their teeth. You can see them using it all day long... The Turkana people have the cleanest bill of dental health in the country.



Animal fat is considered to have medicinal qualities, and the fat-tailed sheep is often referred to as "the pharmacy for the Turkana. »... when they do not grill it to eat it!



For long, Turkana people did not use latrines because it is a taboo for men and women to share same facilities like a latrine. Campaigns have now been initiated to sensitize people on the importance of using latrines for hygiene.



As I was taking pictures of this old Turkana lady, after 3 pictures, she asked me to stop, and started to shout : « You're sucking my blood, you make me feel weak » and she left. The old people believe that pictures are taking their blood away.



Since water is so rare, it's used only for drinking, never for washing. The Turkana clean themselves by rubbing fat all over their skin.



The Turkana place such a high value on cattle that they often raid other tribes to steal animals. These razzias have become more dangerous as they now use guns. As the Turkana are one of the most courageous groups of warriors in Africa, fights are serious!



Turkana have their own justice and the revenge system is working well: if a crime is committed, the family of the victim will try to kill the murderer or someone from its close family. They also can steal to the suspect a large amount of cattle.



In 1960, a famine started in Turkana area, and so missionaries came. But conversion did not meet a huge success (5 % may be converted) as Turkana are nomadics and still have strong believes in their own god.



If a man loses his livestock to drought, he is not only impoverished but shamed. In these cases, NGOs often help get him back on his feet but he can't reclaim his pride until he has reestablished his herd.



This can only happen during festivals: some Turkana with Samburu people. Usually, they fight to steal the other tribe cattle...



Recently, oil has been found in Turkana... many fear Turkanas people may lose their traditions. The recent discovery of massive groundwater reserves in the ground (3 billion cubic meters, nearly three times the water use in New York City) could allow them to keep their traditions for a long time.

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