

Knives times in Ethiopia



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The Dassanech live in southern Ethiopia. Dwelling in isolation along the Omo River, they have retained an ancestral way of life.

They are called the "People from the Delta" in relation to the neighboring Turkana Lake but their world is actually one of desert, dust and acacia trees. Add to this hostile environment the rampant presence of malaria. .

The entire lives of the Dassanech revolve around their cattle, their only wealth. It provides meat, milk – which is essential during times of drought – and skins used as clothing and sleeping mats. The number of cows indicates their owner's social status. Despite their isolation, the Dassanech do not live in peace – their livestock remain under the threat of constant raids by the neighbouring tribes.

To become a man, one must go through the ceremony of the Dime. It takes place every year in June. It is the most important ritual in the lives of young Dassanech. This is the time for circumcision for boys and excision for girls. The time for knives, as the elders say.



The Dassanech are aware that the Ethiopian government is fighting their barbaric customs, so they want as little publicity as possible. They negotiate the number of goats that we will have to offer as a sacrifice. The elders are shouting, spinning their rickety arms in circles, pretending to pass out when they hear our offers, leaving, coming back... A real farce.



The Dime takes place when girls are between 7 and 10 years old, always before the first menstruations. If they do not get circumcised, they will not be able to marry or have children. In everyday life, they will be mocked by others, called monkeys or men, as the clitoris is seen as a penis.



If his daughter does not undergo the mutilation, the father will not receive the dowry of cows, honey, coffee and tobacco. He will also not be able to take part in the council of elders.

So, he has a direct interest in making sure that his daughter is "cut" as they say here. Although the Dassanech are a male-dominated society, the birth of a girl does not equate with bad news.

For them, genital mutilation is a cultural act, not a means to control women's sexuality, as is the case in the Afar tribe.

Dassanech girl with a traditional doll



A temporary village is built especially for the ceremony. Only women were involved in the construction of these large houses made of corrugated metal, pieces of wood and ropes that make them look like homeless shacks. The men take the utmost care NOT to participate in the work, as per the tradition.



During the Dime, the girls who are going to be initiated stay in a hut and may not leave it. Under no circumstances should they be seen by a stranger to the family. Mothers make sure that this sacred rule is respected.



A wooden stick wrapped with a leopard skin and placed in front of the hut indicates the presence inside of a girl waiting to be excised. This stick is no ordinary piece of wood. It must be picked by the brother of the little girl's father and is coated with animal fat to make it shine.



Leopard skin is a precious commodity because the feline has to be hunted far away from the Dassanech land, in areas where enemy tribes live. The warrior who brings a skin back is seen as a brave man and enjoys great fame in his community.



The men wear superb headdresses made of black ostrich feathers. They look like giants on stilts with their skinny bony legs. Their arms are covered with a few dozen metal bracelets. Rubbed against one another, they create a most striking metallic sound.



Cows are slaughtered. Their stomachs are spread on the ground before being cut open. A frenzy takes hold of the Dassanech, who rush over to pick up some of the stomach content and smear their face, arms and legs with it. Everyone participates, even the children. The smell is foul.



The whole ceremony is supervised by men from another village. They have specific roles related to fire and smoke, which put the Dassanech in connection with the divinities. These men speak a secret language between them and must not be disrupted during the celebrations, lest one's son or daughter become infertile.



The cow meat is then shared within the clan. There is no fridge, so it is consumed quickly. The surplus is kept inside the huts, protected from hyenas and thieves. Meat is rare and expensive among the Dassanech. Cows are only killed for exceptional events. The Dime is one of them.



Elders are served first and receive the best meat. Behind them, warriors await the second-class pieces. No one parts with their weapon to eat. They wear the traditional clay bun on the back of the skull. The white ostrich feathers are testament to the fact that they have killed a dangerous animal.



The ceremony is about to begin. The fathers of the initiates-to-be coat the phallic-shaped sticks with clay. It is believed to bring good luck and allow better communication with the gods.



The men paint their bodies with the clay, which is supposed to be imbued with magical power. It is used when misfortune strikes a family or when cattle die. .



It is time for the fathers to put their Kalashnikovs down. Weapons are not allowed during the ceremony – a real heartbreak for these warriors always on the alert.



The women adorn themselves with colobus monkey skins. They are all wearing their most beautiful multicolored necklaces and wield short sticks, which they bang against plastic bottles to sound the beat.



The men and women come together and start dancing, hopping in front of the huts and moving from one to the next. Songs are sung without interruption for an hour. As soon as it becomes too hot, the dancing stops. It will resume at sunset.



The elders are disturbed by my questions. They refuse to let me be present at the circumcisions. No stranger or foreigner has ever attended it as the village would fall victim to a curse. Everyone could die. I am invited to return in the next few days to speak with the young circumcised ones and listen to their stories.



The man in charge of circumcising the boys plays an important role. He is paid in goats by the fathers. He will be fed and housed during the ceremony.



The child must choose a friend who will assist her during the ceremony and will remain her friend for life, almost like a guardian angel. They will have to help each other in the future.



The elders deny that excision is still being practiced but the young women make no secret of it." An elderly woman removes the little girl's clitoris and lips with a blade. In our clan, we say that the clitoris turns into a scorpion. » Once mutilated, the girls have become women and they can wear clothes made of animal skin. They still look like children but the Dassanech now regard them as adults. They can get married and have a baby.



Women talk without taboo about the genital mutilation they suffered when they were little, the fear, shouting or crying.

No one dares to challenge this tradition even if it follows antiquated beliefs. If a girl is not excised, a curse will fall on the whole village, which she will be immediately banished from.



The Ethiopian authorities are trying to put an end to the practice on girls. The risks of infection, haemorrhage and trauma are taken seriously. Excision is the cause of complications during childbirth, which often cost the mother or the baby their lives. Education has become a priority. Schools have been built where the Dassanech live. But with the persisting drought, clans move out in search of pasture for their cattle while schools cannot follow.



After the circumcision, they all stay together in a huge hut made of tree branches, a little further from the village, where they live and sleep until they have healed. It can take weeks. They have a special status. Their families feed and take care of them. They will not eat meat for several weeks, which is believed to help with the scarring.



The teenagers drink coffee decoctions out of large calabashes decorated with cowrie shells. Suddenly, they start spitting on me. I am thus receiving a blessing! A great privilege, according to the elders who are following me everywhere. They explain to me that the young circumcised boys possess supernatural powers. Not only can they bless visitors, they can also cast spells, have visions, heal the sick and even make it rain.



The boys are supposed to be circumcised when they are around 13. Some look much younger, others more mature. The boy receives a bow to hunt birds, gourds to drink from, a wooden pillow to sleep on – which he must not lose or sell lest he die on the spot according to the elders.



"Yesterday, they called me. I was seated on a magic stone. There was a mixture of cow dung and milk on it." This mixture is supposed to reduce the pain. "According to our tradition, at the moment of the circumcision, you must not show your fear or pain. The elders say that you must be 'as insensitive as a corpse' during the procedure. They warned me that the slightest raising of the eyebrows or the faintest yelp will bring shame upon my whole family."

"So, you didn't scream?"

"Of course I did! How could you not scream when they cut skin off your penis?! It's impossible! The man with the knife removes not only the foreskin but also the skin around it. He is peeling off your penis! It feels like it is lasting for ever. You bleed a lot..."

The Dassanech consider the blood that is spilled as an offering to the Earth, not a haemorrhage.



I was expecting to find grimacing teenagers but I find myself in front of a merry bunch. The boys are all smiling broadly, although many of them must be infected and suffer under the hides they are wearing.



Once healed, the new adult becomes a warrior. Soon, he will kill a man to defend his livestock and demonstrate his courage. He will then receive a new warrior name in addition to his birth name and the name of his favorite animal.



Bloody clashes take place regularly, often with the Turkana tribe. Civil war is raging in southern Sudan nearby and Kalashnikovs sell for only \$50. One only needs to take a look at the number of men with scars on their torsos, a sign that they have killed an enemy, to understand the ferocity of the fighting. There are hundreds of deaths every year. Kill a man and you will be a hero among the Dassanech.



Unable to change this mentality, the focus is on single use razor blades. There are many cases of hepatitis in the tribes. The recent construction of a bridge over the Omo River has made the Dassanech even more vulnerable. Many truckers and oil workers are now working in the area. Many NGOs fear an outbreak of AIDS, which is widespread among the drivers, who are known to sleep with prostitutes.



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