

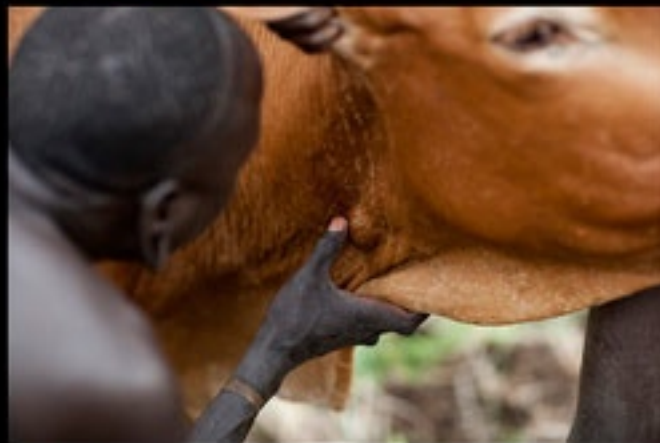
**STICK FIGHTING DAY
IN SURI TRIBE - ETHIOPIA**



**PHOTOS BY
ERIC LAFFORGUE**



Donga stick fights take place after the harvests, the Surmas count days owing to knots on a long stem of grass or jags on the trunk of a tree dedicated to that specific use. Each knot or jag representing a single day, it means that if the bark of the tree is cut with 8 jags for example, the Donga will take on the 8th day of the month.



Before a Donga, some Suri drink the fresh blood of their cattle during the Blood meal ritual. It consists in making a small incision in the cow's carotid artery with a special sharp arrow in order to make it bleed almost two liters of its blood. The warrior has got to drink the entire content in one as blood coagulates quickly. Sometimes warriors do not manage to drink all of the blood contained in the calabash in one mouthful, and vomit all the blood they swallowed. Surma believe the cow's blood is full of vitamins that enable warriors to be fit.



The warriors stop when crossing a river in order to wash themselves, before decorating their bodies for the fight. They decorate themselves by sliding the fingers full of clay on the warrior's bodies. This dressing up and decoration is meant to show their beauty and virility and thus catch the women's attention.

Body paintings are also especially made during the long periods spent in the camps where the cattle is kept by young men and women. These camps are located far away from the village and the practice of body painting is an informal and play event seen as an expression of liberty and independence for these young people.







Body paintings unfortunately show the increasing impact of foreign tourists. Suri people have developed and created new body paintings as well as new dress codes in order to attract tourists. They have understood that foreigners would be more eager to take pictures from them with such decorative paintings and ornaments, and to pay for it. A few years ago, Suri boys started to disguise by wearing flower headdresses, while Mursi girls started to wear small metallic rollers in their hair, that were formerly worn during menstruation periods. These dress codes, invented for some of them, have lost their social and cultural meaning. Noticing these strategies were successful neighboring tribes and villages started to imitate the Surma. These « ethno » tourists influence the material culture of the Omo Valley people and its expression, and by doing so, cause changes, they paradoxically don't want to see happening.



Donga fights attract the most beautiful girls of the area, hoping to be chosen by the champions. The purpose is not to get married but to flirt. Young women wear necklaces around the neck that give to the winners. Scarifications are considered an important sign of beauty in Surma culture.





Fighters arrive on the Donga field all together, carrying the strongest man, dancing and singing "I am the Hero, who's gonna fight me?".



Most of the warriors use no protection at all and fight completely naked in order to show their bravery. The neck and head are the most vulnerable parts of the body.



Some of the Donga fights, involving only 10 fighters, are sometimes held by the few tourists visiting this bank of the Omo River. However for real Donga fights hundreds of warriors gather and the approval of the chiefs is necessary at the risk of violent reactions of the warriors and the audience, even from the young ones, if it is not asked.



A fighter can challenge whoever he wants (to a duel) and hit any part of his opponent's body. There is only one rule which strictly forbids to hit a man when he is down.





Some breaks interrupt the fights so that warriors can get drunk, and by doing so take courage. As the time progresses, fights become more violent and the more tension is high.



If a fighter gets hurt, he will not be granted any compensation. If he gets killed, which happens from time to time, **his** family must get compensation. Usually 20 cows or a girl will do. No one shows his pain, but on the contrary shows his blood bleeding or his flesh wounds.





When a fighter is down : it means he has been knocked down or that he gives up because of the violence of his opponent's hits.



The winners have a right to choose girls. Girls are allowed to refuse, but being chosen is considered an honour. By giving a necklace, they are to share moments with the warrior. Before marriage, girls can have sexual relationships with anyone they want but once they are married, it is strictly forbidden and they have to be faithful to their husband.



Groupies gather on a small hill to watch the fights in safety. At their feet, liters of the local beer called gesso.



At the end of the fights, the champion point their phallic sticks in direction of the girls they want to date with. if the girl put a necklace around the stick, it means she is willing to date the him.





What is Surmas' future going to be ? Cellphones recently reached their villages, roads are being built by chinese companies, young people go studying in Addis and abandon the Donga tradition...



Surmas (or Suri) live in southern Ethiopia, on the west bank of the Omo River. Since time immemorial, they have had to fight to protect their land and cattle, especially against their enemies, the fierce Nyangatom. Civil War in Sudan flooded the area with AK 47, and raids have become increasingly bloody. In this context of continuous insecurity, Surmas have more than ever to display their courage, their virility and their strength, and Donga is a unique occasion to perpetuate their legend.

In order to witness these ritual fights, a two or three days long drive from Addis Abeba with a 4WD is necessary. Once there, you will spend the night at the Police Station of Turgit (two shacks made with bits and pieces) in the middle of huts and under the constant surveillance of local armed policemen... Just forget about mobile phone, newspapers, TV or any Internet access, you are cut off from the rest of the world, surrounded by naked warriors and women wearing lip plates.

One of the main Surma customs is stick fighting. This ritual sport is called Donga or Sagenai. Donga is both the name of the sport and the stick, whereas sagenai is the name of the stick-fighting session. In most cases, stick fighting is a way for warriors to find girlfriends, it can also be a way to settle conflicts. On this occasion men show their resistance to pain, to the young women. The fights are held between Suri villages, gathering hundreds of warriors.

The day before the sagenai, fighters have to purge themselves. They do it by drinking a special preparation, called Dokai, which is made of the bark of a special tree, which is mixed with water. After taking it, warriors make themselves vomit the drink. The water is supposed to bring with it many of the body's impurities. After this ritual they don't eat until the following morning. Some warriors also drink cow's blood, as they believe it is full of vitamins enabling them to be fit.

Warriors walk for kilometers to take part in the Sagenai. They stop when crossing a river in order to decorate their bodies for the fight. They paint their body with clay and mutually draw very graphic drawings everywhere. This making up is meant to show their beauty and virility. The phallic shape ending the sticks contributes to that virile attitude.

When arriving on the Donga field all together, fighters carry the strongest man, dancing and singing, and haranguing the opponent troops. Some fighters wear colourful headdresses sometimes with feathers on it, and sometimes even protectors on the knees, head and elbows. But most of them use no protection at all and fight completely naked, as it is considered the ultimate symbol of bravery. They also wear necklaces made with coloured beads around their neck and waist ; given by girls at previous Dongas. Most of the time their genitals are uncovered.

In the beginning each fighter looks for an opponent of the same stature and exchanges a few held back blows with him in order to test him. If both fighters feel they have found a match, they suddenly throw themselves into the fight, hitting ferocious strokes with their sticks. If one of the warriors is knocked out or puts paid to the fight, his opponent is immediately declared the winner. Sagenai consists in qualifying rounds, each winner fighting the winner of a previous fight, until two finalists are left, but in the mass hysteria there are several winners. As the hours go by, fights become increasingly dangerous, as the audience and warriors get drunk with local beer and are trigger-happy. It is also the moment when old disputes get out again and can degenerate into a fight or sometimes even worse.

Referees make sure rules are being followed. It is strictly forbidden to hit a man when he is down on the ground. It is also forbidden for a fighter to kill his opponent. If it happens the family of the deceased fighter must get compensation usually with 20 cows or a girl. The opponent and all his family can be banned from the village for life. Most of the fights end within the first couple of hits. It is quite usual to see men bleeding and show huge flesh wounds. Stick fighting has proven to be dangerous as warriors have already been killed from being hit in the stomach, the neck or the head... Losing an eye or breaking one's fingers during the Donga is quite common.

For the other locals, especially teenage girls, sagenai is a great outing. They watch the fights, but it is also the occasion for them to check out the men they go for, and to meet them. At the end of the fights, winners point their phallic shaped sticks in direction of the girls they want to date with, if the girl put a necklace around the stick, it means she is willing to date the champion.

Donga is over, and fighters go back in their villages to narrate their feats.

Contrary to the neighbouring tribes of the eastern bank of Omo river like the Mursis who developed a kind of ethno tourism leading to the disappearance of their traditions, Surmas have always been spared from mass tourism owing to their remoteness. Recently roads are being built by Chinese companies, mobile phone network is available in some areas, and young Surmas, stirred by missionaries, go to school, sometimes all the way to Addis. Once back in the Omo Valley they don't take part on Dongas and dress in the European way, because people from the capital city make fun of them calling them « primitives ». They also ask their brides-to-be not to pierce their lip for their future lipplate. But the main threat for Surmas still is Ethiopian government planning touristic and economic projects regardless of the impact they can have on local life.

Surmas are also threatened by the flow of weapons coming from the nearby Sudanese border, as conflicts between Surma village or even between families (called Revenge, a kind of never-ending vendetta) are settled with Kalashnikovs. Local chiefs have less and less influence, and are not able to put an end to these bloody clashes. During the two weeks I spent among the Surmas, a young girl was shot down, her mother received a bullet wound, and a man miraculously escaped the bullets of one of his enemies, all of this under the eyes of the local « police ».