

Omo Fashion



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In southern Ethiopia, a two day car ride away from Addis Abeba, live tribes who have maintained a traditional way of life. Recently, the region has undergone rapid development through the addition of new roads and large farms.

Though they continue to live modestly, these tribes have slowly begun to enter the world of international consumerism. This is due to the readily accessible products made in China. Their creativity in mixing foreign and modern styles with traditional tribal attire has given them a unique look.

They may have never seen the work of the great designers like Jean Paul Gaultier and yet one can see the influence of western couture in their clothing.



Two years ago, a vendor from Addis Abeba brought hair clips to a market in the village of Turmi, where the Hamar tribe resides. The hair clips became an immediate success and both women and men adorn themselves with this accessory.



The people of the Hamar tribe do admit that wearing multiple hair clips in front of their face tends to disrupt their field of vision, yet they continue to follow this popular trend. They clip the length of the ponytail with numerous clips in a long cascading effect. Their hair is grown specifically for this purpose. The plastic hair clips in brighter colors have more value, but are also more expensive.



The men of the Bana tribe also enjoy sporting hair clips. They wear them in the same fashion as the Hamar. The clips have an aesthetic purpose only. The accessories are not gender specific as they are in western culture. Thus, a Dassanech warrior may wear earrings meant for females, and he will not be viewed as feminine. A Bana man can also adorn himself with fake flowers without worrying about being mocked.



Men are just as interested in fashion as women, but take a more practical approach. The tribal sense of sharing plays a role in local fashion as well.

This Dassanech warrior in Omorate shared his plastic boots. He used the boot leg as decoration while a second warrior used the sole.





The photography vest pictured above, a gift, was cut in half by the Menit tribesmen in the village of Tum. A similar garment was split by a Bana man (pictured right), allowing multiple people to use an article of clothing. With numerous pockets, the vest is useful in this region. Sharing clothes is a common practice amongst these tribes.



In the village of Hana, the Bodi women do not carry purses due to the hostile environment they live in. Their land was seized by the government which resulted in bloody wars among neighboring tribes. Here, a simple plastic bottle can become a fashion accessory when adorned with beads. The plastic bottle is a precious resource in this region, due to the fact that containers such as these are extremely rare.



Southern Ethiopian tribes recycle everything. Old watches can make great additions to headdresses among the Dassanech. The old woman pictured here also understood the headdress' value as a tourist attraction. Wearing unusual decorations draws more tourists (she is paid to have her photo taken).

On the right, this young Mursi girl began attending school due to government pressure. The reigning government wishes to contain the warrior tribe she belongs to. Here she is seen wearing a collection of syringe caps around her neck. They were collected during a vaccination campaign in her village and she strung them into a necklace.



Omorate has become a rite of passage on the Omo river and bars have begun popping up, welcoming the workers who had been building the local bridge to relax and have a drink. Caps from beer and Coke bottles have found an aesthetic purpose among the Dassanech people who reside on the riverbank. Sewn together, they make an eye-catching wig.



Ever since the mobile phone has made its way into their culture, the wealthier residents of the village may purchase disposable prepaid phone cards as well as cellular phones. Men and women of both the Bana and the Hamar tribes are seen adorning the phone cards as earrings. The cards are made of rigid plastic, are geometric in shape, and are quite durable.



Bras haven't taken an important place in tribal fashion. The Ethiopian government requires that women cover their breasts when travelling to the market and interacting with people of religion. As a result, many women have integrated the bra into their daily attire and wear it alone. A woman in Gambella (pictured above), a region in the northwest, has made turned her bra into a fashion statement by sewing beads into the fabric.



Upon our first meeting two years ago, this young Hamar woman was bare chested and sporting a traditional tribal haircut.

When we met again, she was dressed in western clothing. The only element that indicated any trace of her traditional roots was the necklace she wore. This was due to her church affiliation. Once she joined the church, the priests demanded she cover up.



These young Hamer women wear traditional clothing made of sheepskin and beads. The young woman to the right opted for clothing made from textiles, which are much more expensive than hides - and not as durable - but signify wealth.





Sunglasses appeared in the markets of the Omo valley only a few years ago. They are made in China and are worn by both women and men. They are kept in such pristine condition, that the wearer will not remove the sticker on the lens, though this inhibits their field of vision. These tribes don't particularly care about brand names, but like the "sapeurs" in central Africa, they believe it is important to show off the logo.



With a few exceptions, these tribes are not familiar with football. Only a select number of villages with access to a TV broadcast the English Premier League. The proliferation of secondhand football jerseys has no relation to a passion for the sport. The tribes buy the jerseys simply because they enjoy the bright colors. They blend well with their traditional decorations: beads, necklaces, headaddresses).



There has been an increase in the purchase of second hand clothing in Africa, and Ethiopia is no exception. The choice to buy an article of clothing is always influenced by the desire to create a certain look, such as these two women pictured above. It can create stunning results, such as the young woman pictured above in the leopard print tank top. Ironically, a lot of clothing produced in Africa finds its way back after being worn by westerners for a few years.



Tsemay



Hamer



Surma

In recent years, hats have become very fashionable. Upon our meeting, tribesmen would ask me for either money or the hat upon my head. Vendors have responded to the increase in demand with made of straw in Ethiopia's national colors.



A young Tsemay warrior curiously reading the Vogue magazine that was sitting in my 4x4.



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