

FARAWAY LOOK
Karo tribeswomen
Right, from top:
a member of the
Dassanech tribe;
Gheleb tribeswomen
and children



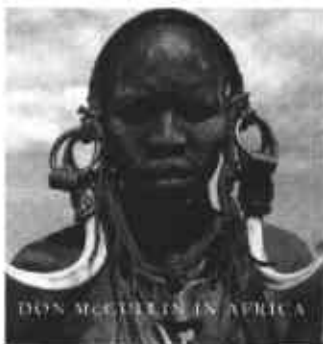
A tribal quest

To travel the Ethiopian river Omo is to marvel at the diversity of traditional African life. Don McCullin makes a pilgrimage to an extraordinary corner of the world

I made a number of journeys in 2001 and 2004 to photograph the tribes along the Omo river basin, in a corner of Ethiopia that borders southern Sudan. The Omo rises in the central highlands and flows down into Lake Turkana. As you move south, the features of those you meet become rounder, darker and tenser. You cross a boundary into another world where people are festooned with weapons, and you can sense surrounding danger. From Addis Ababa, it is a journey of three long days on untarmacked roads, eating dust and swiping at the biting tsetse fly. But the landscape has a haunting beauty, despite the extreme heat; and it feels like a privilege to be there.

These people live a life untouched by Western development. The men, tall and

with perfect physiques, are naked, and the women wear huge clay lip-plates, an adornment considered beautiful. I had been inspired by the pictures of the Nuba tribes of Sudan, so starkly shot by the German photographer and film-maker Leni Riefenstahl in the 1960s; and when, in 2001, I first encountered the Mursi, who have a reputation for aggression, I decided there and then to go back.



Cattle represent the wealth of this tribe; they drink the cattle's blood and milk and eat their meat, and use them as currency to buy weapons and wives. The exchange rate is about 30 cattle for a wife. Cattle rustling is rife. The frustrated energy of the young Surma and Mursi tribes is released through the ritual *donga*, a fierce stick battle, which usually takes place after the harvest.

The fights are a great excuse for a party, for ritualistic bathing, body adornment and seduction. The *donga* are pretty brutal events: legs are broken; eyes are lost; and when the fighting gets too serious or jealousy flares up, out come the Kalashnikovs. On my last visit to a village stick-fight, we had to make a quick getaway in the Landrover as bullets whizzed about our ears.

My great pleasure at the end of a long day was to plunge into the crystal-clear waters of a stream off the Omo and wash the grime and dust away. But there is also nothing like an African dawn – it has been my favourite time of day there since I first went to East Africa, aged 19, with the RAF photographic unit. It brings the promise of fresh adventure and the longing for the day's first cup of PG Tips. □ *'Don McCullin in Africa'* (£35, Jonathan Cape) is out now. A two-week journey around the Omo valley and Lake Turkana costs from £3,300 a person, excluding flights, with *Journeys by Design* (01273 723790; www.journeysbydesign.co.uk).

PHOTOGRAPHS DON MCCULLIN