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The River. Peoples and Histories of the Omo-Turkana Area

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At the beginning of the volume, the editors express their aim to provide 'an introduction to the many faces and facets of the people and environments that give life to the Omo-Turkana area'. The overall structure, historic scope and style of the contributions reflect this goal in 25 short essays that start with a leading question, go without citations, have a short list of references and contain illustrations such as photographs, drawings and maps. The authors provide insights into a wide array of topics that are connected through the waters and currents of the Omo River in Southern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya.

The volume is organised into five parts. Part 1: Prehistoric Life and Environment gathers facets that have been buried in the ground for as long as four million years, with revealing contributions about hominin fossil findings and archaeological evidence of tools and technologies. Insights into the prehistory of first humans, fauna and environment introduce the Lower Omo Valley and Turkana Basin as paleontological hotspots that help understand 'key moments' in human evolution.

Part 2: Pastoral Pasts – Entering History starts with palaeo-environmental studies, confirming the adaptability of pastoralists in the region to different types and scales of environmental impact from pre-historical times on. The section also provides information on the archaeology of pastoralism and a short history of pastoral artefacts from the Lower Omo in museums around the world. The South Omo Museum and Research Center (SORC) in Jinka is mentioned as the first museum in the region. It could be added that people from the respective communities took an active part in choosing and providing objects for the museum.

Part 3: Pastoral Presents – The Mursi can be seen as the pastoral centrepiece of the volume. The long-term engagement and experience of researchers working and living among the Mursi and Bodi result in engaged essays that give voice to agro-pastoralists in diverse ways, starting with the origin myth of the Mun (Mursi) as told by Luguloitheno Jordomo and David Turton. The myth intertwines places and waters with their qualities for humans and animals into a story of migration, becoming and identity, that crosses not only the Omo River, but also from the past into the future. This impressive overture is followed by deeply informed, vignette-like essays about the colours of name-giving, healing, beautification of cattle and people, material culture, lip plates, the duel ceremony, cosmology, plants and crops. All the essays contribute to a rich mosaic of places and people, soil and water, voices and pictures that are grounded and poetic at the same time.

Part 4: Exceptional Diversity – Omo Cultures, travels further along the Omo River into the cultural neighbourhood of South Omo and into wider political entanglements. The first essay, with reference to Kara, maps out the political experience of people that cannot be reduced to ethnicity, as their modes of identification are too manifold, their knowledge as agro-pastoralists too wide-reaching and their autonomy too distinct to be subsumed under a simple criterion. The essay on linguistic diversity also strengthens the point that the Lower Omo Valley is not a place of stagnation but is characterised through the dynamics of interethnic relations across space and, as the essay about sacrificial sites demonstrates, across time and across communities. Readers learn about the creative relation between herders and their favourite animals in Hamar, not as just another detail about pastoralism, but in its reference to *barjo* of Hamar, a continuous creation of

wellbeing in the world. The essay about Suri is outspoken in its gloomy realism about disempowerment and dispossession of agro-pastoralists by the Ethiopian Government, with policies that focus not on people as citizens with equal rights but on the resources under their feet. For the Kwegu hunters, these currents are the most traumatic, turning independent hunters into low-paid plantation workers in unfavourable new environments of labour and discrimination.

Part 5: Finding the Omo – Threats and Impacts provides glimpses of actors outside the cultural neighbourhood of the Lower Omo Valley and pictures the fascination the region has held for travellers and tourists from the end of the nineteenth century until today. Admiration for people, and violence against them, were part and parcel of explorations and colonial expansion in a decisive era that brought the people of the Lower Omo under the reign of the Ethiopian Empire. The fascination, problematic asymmetry and exoticising dynamics of international tourism that has chosen the Lower Omo Valley as a prime destination for global travellers also raises calls for more equitable community tourism. The final essay is a strong warning about the ‘major survival crisis’ for pastoralists and fishermen at Lake Turkana. As the Omo River’s fresh water and nutrient levels have begun to decrease with the filling of the Gibe III Dam far to the North, the effects on communities at the southern end of the Omo River are devastating.

The volume closes with a picture that shows the hand of a person putting an ox moulded out of clay near a fire to bake it. The picture is symbolic for the connections – of people, cattle, clay, soil, water and fire over millennia – that run through the volume. With the verve and engagement of all authors to describe their part of the picture, the reader might ask if much of what is learnt will soon be no more, or if telling it in dedicated ways will provide keys to better understanding and reconsideration of a devastating wave of so-called development that has undermined life as lived with ‘The River’?

This book is loaded with fine expertise that shows history of the Lower Omo Valley through uncountable ups and down, times of drought and rain, conflict and peace-making, migration and settlement and cultural innovation. The rich dynamics of being in the world as (agro-) pastoralists, hunters and fishermen along the Omo River seem to be the current of the volume, while the disruptive character of the recent developments appears as its solemn undercurrent. It is an undercurrent that cannot stir the missing waters of the frequently dry river bed as the floods have ceased since 2016, but becomes tangible in its magnitude in the loss of autonomy, cultural diversity and biodiversity, and the political exclusion of people through dispossession and resettlement under the forceful waves of developmentalism.

With its well-researched facts and many better- and less known facets about people, cattle and environments, the volume is an homage to those who give life, are life and connect life in, along and with ‘The River’. The generous space provided for photographs supports their evocative role. It works like comparable volumes that are carried by the contributor’s dedication to and engagement with the place and its people, without the length of a solely text-based edited volume, nor the superficiality of a coffee-table book. This clear and unburdened setup provides a timely mosaic that honours the interconnection of many forms of life. This is achieved through the poignant contributions in assemblage fashion that evoke more than can be explained. The essays invite repeated reading to find and experience the elements between symbols and materiality that weave the meanings of this volume together so its tenor might be found somewhere between the opening photograph, in which a Mursi man, during a ritual, throws clay into the river to

be dissolved in the waters, and the closing photograph where the favourite oxen made out of clay are burnt so that they become solid. Such is the materiality of this book, similar to the colourful, grounded, transitory, playful and serious appearances of clays throughout the essays. It is a fine volume that depicts what it promises and evokes even more with its distinct style. Its free online availability will add to its value for readers with different backgrounds to read and combine the wealth of information creatively.

The colour temperatures of the photographs could be more balanced to avoid colour casts and the map could have included all ethnic groups of the region. One point of regret is that although the innovative format could have provided the opportunity to invite those 'who give life to the river', that is, agro-pastoralists and fishermen, to contribute as authors and photographers, this opportunity was not chosen. Although some voices have been very well represented, as in Turton's and Eczet's essays, academics need to initiate a change in the way they talk about pastoralists, or for them, by also providing more space for listening to them as authors. This fabulous and respectful volume would have been one opportunity to do so, as mutual dedication 'to the peoples – past present and future – of the Lower Omo Valley and Lake Turkana' and all those who continue or start learning from them. This book is an inspiring source for doing so.

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