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Realização:

Lei Rouanet

MINISTÉRIO DA CULTURA

Kity Ramos

When the Earth whispers

origem



When the Earth whispers

Kity Ramos

Texto
Kaíke Nanne

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When the Earth whispers

text by Kaíke Nanne

origem

To those who came before, who opened the way.

To those who walk it today, giving it new meaning.

Above all, to my children, Felipe and Júlia.



The gaze that finds the soul

by Roberto Gambini

To photograph Africa—or, more precisely, the descendants of some of its ancestral peoples—is not something one does with impunity. The familiar images of this vast continent, from those rendered in pen and ink, watercolor, or lithography by nineteenth-century naturalists—our own Debret comes to mind—were tainted from the outset by the colonial gaze, or by a fascination with all that was exotic, anthropological, or a wonder of nature. Images of this kind invariably bore the stamp of those who saw themselves as superior to societies and peoples deemed primitive, backward, out of step with the train of modernity—in short, relegated to the so-called Third World. One notorious image comes to mind: the white hunter, surrounded by rifle-bearing companions and porters, his boot planted on the chest of a slain lion—a symbol of the triumph of the white race.

Nothing could be further from Kity Ramos's compelling collection of portraits of the guardians of tradition in communities of northern Africa. It begins with the glances and smiles exchanged among everyone involved—she and they, behind and before the lens. What one senses immediately is the photographer's extraordinary capacity for empathy. She seems to have chosen not to remain on the conventional surface of things, but to surrender instead to the emotion flowing both ways in that moment, to the souls of these remarkable people—as enigmatic as kings and queens walking across a floor of dry sand, kings and queens unto themselves.

Despite the harshness of the landscape, the near absence of green set against a moving abundance of smiles; despite the salt water of the region's only lagoon, home to a retinue of crocodiles; despite, too, the extreme material austerity of life there, we are struck by the astonishing humanity of these people: the bonds of community they weave, the joy written across their faces, and the serenity with which they are able to feel whole simply by being who they are.

And what are we to make of these open smiles, these unguarded eyes, these speaking hands, these postures of people so fully at home in their own bodies, in their own place of being and belonging?

Kity made contact. She learned, listened to stories, drew closer. Invited in, she entered several homes and held in her hands the magnificent necklaces with which women and men adorn themselves. There, among them, she was fully present, as genuinely interested in the Other as the camera she carried. And it is precisely this loving connection that I see as the watermark running through her photographs.

Our gaze upon people such as these is not unclouded. The immense and never-repaid debt of slavery stands between us and them, and the terrible past echoes through everything. It is as though we were unable to free our gaze and, at last, look upon Africa and its people with empathy and clear sight. For the truth is that the gaze we lack lies buried beneath the stones covering the paths along which enslaved people left their sweat and their blood.

What lies buried there is our own sensitivity, our sense of fellowship, our capacity to share in the human condition. And then, in the right hands, something as simple as a camera breaks through that hard covering of stone and awakens a part of our soul left stunned and imprisoned by History, by guilt, and by indifference.

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Different peoples. Different cosmologies. Different ways of coming into the world, of loving, governing, celebrating, and dying. A land where extraordinary ways of understanding the world have taken root. An ancestral homeland defended with resolve and blood.



The sun is a hammer, striking without mercy. Aridity is an unrelenting challenge. Living on this land takes far more than endurance. It takes memory, experience, and the ability to turn scarcity into possibility.



Skin as a surface upon which identity is inscribed. Adornment as an expression of history, tradition, and communal bonds. Territory, ancestry, and clan inscribe themselves upon the body. Nothing is arbitrary. Everything has meaning.



Songs. Dances. Drumming.
The very land that, to
Western eyes, may seem
unfit for human life is home
to an enduring spectacle
of sound and color, to
rituals handed down across
millennia, and to communal
bonds continually renewed.



Water draws the geography of life. It determines where to plant, where to graze herds, where to build villages, where to perform rituals, and how to endure another dry season. Its presence rearranges the entire human landscape, determining paths and destinies.



A land of many worlds

Few places on Earth are home to as great a diversity of peoples, languages, and cosmologies as the Omo–Turkana cultural complex.



ARBORE — Estimated population: 13,000

In a land encircled by mountains, the Arbore combine herding and farming adapted to the semi-arid climate. They retain a monarchical system of four kings, while each of the nine clans holds sway over a particular realm: rain, livestock, warfare, healing, and others. Initiation ceremonies and marriage rites reflect a society in which prestige, authority, and kinship remain deeply intertwined.

BANNA — Estimated population: 53,000

The Banna inhabit the highlands, where they grow cereals and raise livestock. They are known for their skill in walking on stilts, originally used to gather fruit and spot animals amid the vegetation. Their social organization centers on a monarchy with a single king, clans, councils of elders, and rituals that reinforce community bonds.

DASSANECH — Estimated population: 120,000

The Dassanech live on the arid plains near the Omo River delta and along the northern shores of Lake Turkana. Herding, fishing, and seasonal farming sustain their economy. Adapted to severe climatic fluctuations, they have developed sophisticated strategies for inhabiting the land and a rich tradition of ornaments crafted from natural and recycled materials.

EL MOLO — Estimated population: 1,200

The El Molo, Kenya's smallest ethnic group, live in small villages along the southeastern shore of Lake Turkana. Traditionally fishers, they have relied on the lake's resources for survival for centuries. Their culture preserves specialized knowledge of navigation, fishing, and the use of lake environments. Over generations, they have adapted their way of life to the brackish waters and the surrounding desert landscape.

GABBRA — Estimated population: 190,000

The Gabbra are renowned for camel herding, which shapes their economy, their movements, and much of their social life. Many practice Islam or Christianity, often alongside longstanding local traditions. The large translucent veils worn by women are among the most distinctive visual elements of their culture.

HAMAR — Estimated population: 92,000

Spread across a vast region encircled by the Buska mountain range, the Hamar combine herding and farming. They are known for the Ukuli Bula, a ritual in which young men demonstrate their maturity by leaping completely naked over a row of bulls. The ceremony lasts several days and involves music, dancing, ritual whipping, and the active participation of the entire community.

KARO — Estimated population: 5,000

The Karo live along the Omo River, where they grow cereals in the fertile soils nourished by seasonal floods. Friendship holds a central place in their culture—their language even has a specific term for a friend regarded as a brother. They cultivate a distinctive aesthetic in which beauty is defined not by physical attributes, but by the abundance of colorful adornments.

KWEGU — Estimated population: 4,000

Among the smallest peoples of the Omo Valley, the Kwegu live along the Omo River and traditionally combine fishing, farming, and gathering. They maintain close ties with neighboring communities, particularly the Mursi. Their funerary rites and cosmological narratives preserve distinctive beliefs about the fate of the dead and the continuity of communal life.

MURSI — Estimated population: 4,000

Having faced frequent conflict, the Mursi are among the most heavily armed peoples of the Omo–Turkana complex. They live within an area of Mago National Park. They practice herding and seasonal farming and are organized into clans. They are known for the lip plates worn by women, a tradition associated with the transition to adulthood, marriage, and cultural identity.

NJEMPS — Estimated population: 33,000

The Njemps live south and southeast of Lake Baringo, in Kenya's Rift Valley. They combine irrigated farming, fishing, and livestock herding, an unusual adaptation among Maa-speaking peoples. They share many cultural traits with the Samburu and Maasai, including the age-set system, the prestige accorded to elders, and initiation rites that structure the community's social organization.

NYANGATOM — Estimated population: 60,000

The Nyangatom are spread across the far southwest of Ethiopia, near the borders with South Sudan and Kenya, in a land where everything seems brown. They rely mainly on cattle herding and cereal cultivation. Body scarification, adornments, and initiation rites express prestige and belonging in a society deeply structured by kinship ties.

POKOT — Estimated population: 1,000,000

The Pokot live on both sides of the border between Kenya and Uganda. Traditionally, they are divided between pastoral and farming communities, adapting to different environments. Cattle play a central role in the economy, family alliances, and marriage, while elders are key to mediating conflicts and passing traditions from one generation to the next.

RENDILLE — Estimated population: 97,000

The Rendille inhabit the Chalbi Desert and neighboring regions of northern Kenya. They specialize in camel herding, essential for food, transport, and mobility. Their culture blends ancient pastoral traditions with Islamic influences, preserving elaborate male initiation ceremonies and a strong social organization based on age groups.

SURI — Estimated population: 54,000

Pastoralists and farmers, the Suri inhabit remote mountainous areas. They have a monarchy of three kings supported by councils of elders. Among their principal traditions is the donga, a form of stick fighting that marks male initiation and reinforces prestige, courage, and discipline. Women place great value on expressions of beauty, reflected in everyday life through floral adornments.

TURKANA — Estimated population: 1,500,000

The Turkana, Kenya's largest pastoral people, inhabit vast areas around the lake that bears their name. Herds of goats, cattle, and camels shape their economy and social organization. Despite the widespread adoption of Christianity, they preserve ancestral practices, including blessing rituals performed with saliva and ancient systems of divination.



When the Earth whispers

What the peoples of the Omo Valley and Lake Turkana reveal about belonging, community, and ancestral ways of knowing the invisible world

by Kaíke Nanne

The desert flies sideways at us. It strikes with savage force. The cloud of sand seems endless. Within seconds, dust clings to the skin, seals the pores, invades nostrils and ears, mouth and the crevices between fingers and nails. Through a veil of sweat, our eyes grope for dancing shadows beneath the amber light before dusk. Hands cupped above the brows help us make out organic forms: children jumping, playing, feigning combat; women gliding past with jerry cans of water balanced on their heads; slow-moving goats searching for the few remaining shrubs. But blindness quickly returns, so dense is the dust that it forces our eyes shut. The dryness mocks all living things. The heat is fierce. Why choose a place like this to live?

We are in the village of Lomhe, in Dassanech territory, at the far southwestern edge of Ethiopia, near the borders with Kenya and South Sudan. It is a region of stark contrasts. During the dry season, which lasts two-thirds of the year, water becomes a constant concern and must be fetched from distant wells. Between March and May, the rains can be so intense that entire huts collapse. The Omo River runs about eight kilometers away. Lake Turkana, into which it flows, lies roughly seventy kilometers from here. Farther on, 150 kilometers away, the Chalbi Desert marks the outer edge of this same climatic system. It is from there that the prolonged droughts and hot winds laden with mineral dust come — like the one lashing us now.

For the twenty-two Indigenous peoples of the Omo–Turkana region, whose combined population is estimated at one million, inhabiting this land is not a matter of choice. Their most distant ancestors have been here since time immemorial, since Homo sapiens began domesticating animals and building temporary shelters to carry them through the seasons. Between the eighth and third millennia BCE, Indigenous populations of southwestern Ethiopia began interacting with pastoral groups from the Upper Nile, in what is now South Sudan, and from the highlands of the Horn of Africa, in the eastern reaches of the continent between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. From these encounters — marked by exchange, alliances, and conflict — emerged the human and cultural complex that still defines this region, an area slightly smaller than the Brazilian state of Santa Catarina. Some peoples developed cosmogonies, rituals, and forms of social organization of their own; others share similar mythologies and communal structures based on clans. Yet all hold one certainty: this is their ancestral homeland, a sacred enclave they cannot imagine leaving and one that, generation after generation, has been defended with blood.

The resilience, courage, struggle, and violence required to inhabit this land have shaped the belief systems of the communities of the Omo Valley and Lake Turkana. For most of them — though the narratives vary in their details — the origin myth tells of the creative act of a supreme God, Bário, and the cruelties of a spirit embodying the essence of evil, called Méchi. After creating the universe and humankind, Bário withdrew, choosing to remain distant from human affairs. He neither intervenes in earthly matters nor comes to the aid of helpless mortals — which is why there is little reason to offer him sacrifices. Méchi, by contrast, is wholly concerned with the world of the living. He brings epidemics, contaminates wells and rivers, and sows discord. Animal sacrifices are therefore offered to him: Méchi must be appeased — otherwise, misfortune multiplies. This logic of bargaining with the invisible echoes the idea that the earliest rituals arose not from gratitude for a benevolent world, but from a pragmatic fear of capricious forces. Seen in this light, religion is born less as a hymn of praise than as insurance against catastrophe: something precious is sacrificed today so that the spirit of discord will not demand twice as much tomorrow.

And what is to be done when fortune smiles — with an exceptional harvest, for

instance, or the birth of a healthy child? Ayko, an elder of the Kwegu village of Kuchuru on the banks of the Omo River, explains that it is advisable to dedicate a fine basket of fruit and grain to Bário, usually entrusted to the oldest person in the community — or, among peoples governed by monarchies, to their kings, though this is not the case among the Kwegu. With a conductor's gestures and a double-bass voice, Ayko takes care to explain, serenely, other aspects of their relationship with Bário. Although God is not directly responsible for auspicious events, it is fitting to honor him, for he is the creator of all that exists, and it is to his immaterial realm that the souls of the righteous are bound. And what becomes of the unworthy? Well, well... They will keep Méchi company.

The Kwegu funeral rite signals the destiny of the soul. When a decent man dies, he is buried in front of his house. Women's graves lie beside the dwellings. Children are buried inside the houses. But when a scoundrel dies — someone who made life miserable for family and village alike, stole cattle from neighboring peoples, and stirred up needless conflict — the body is buried in front of the tool shed, some distance from the homes.

An even harsher fate awaits those deemed unworthy among the Dassanech, the people on whose parched plain we faced the sandstorm. Their bodies are simply abandoned far from the villages, left to wild animals. The virtuous, by contrast, are honored with a great funeral feast, with roasted meat, drink, and abundant dancing. The Dassanech do not believe in an afterlife. There is a creator God and there are spirits that wander among the living, doing good or evil, but none awaits human beings when the physical body dies — there is no soul; death is the end. The incentive to live an upright life lies not in the promise of eternal reward, but in the certainty that one's family will not suffer the shame of seeing the dead cast out to jackals and hyenas.

Rather than grief and despair, funeral rites among the ethnic groups of the Omo–Turkana complex generally celebrate the life of the departed. There are, however, significant variations. The Suri, who inhabit remote hills and valleys, break the arms and legs of the dead so that the bodies can be wrapped in the fetal position — death is understood as a new birth. Among the Turkana, meanwhile, the body is often left in the open outside the village, allowing decomposition to follow its natural course: the emphasis falls less on the corpse than on the continuing journey of the living. Beyond the celebration held for the funeral itself, the Hamar, scattered across a vast expanse encircled by the Buska mountain range, hold a ceremony whose name might loosely be translated as "The Last Day to Remember." Every ten or fifteen years — depending on the number of dead to be honored; the more, the better — Hamar communities hold a great celebration to which friends, distant relatives, and neighboring villages are invited. Once the celebration is over, those who have been honored must, deliberately, be forgotten.

Practices such as these are often labeled "primitive" through Western eyes, accustomed to associating death and mourning with contrition, silence, and solemnity — anything outside that repertoire tends to be regarded as evidence of backwardness or incivility. It is a shallow prejudice. Many peoples whose societies are organized around other visions of the world, rooted in non-Eurocentric cosmogonies, have developed social structures, forms of government, and normative codes every bit as complex as those of Western societies. Long before constitutional monarchy took hold in European countries, for example, the peoples of the Omo–Turkana belt were already organized according to institutional systems of their own, with kings, leaders chosen by the community, and clearly defined spiritual authorities.

With an estimated population of 54,000, the Suri nation has a distinctive political structure. Power is shared among three kings, each from one of the three principal

clans, with dynastic and hereditary succession; an elected leader whose responsibilities are comparable to those of a prime minister; and, finally, a parliament formed by an assembly of elders. The principal difference between this structure and contemporary European monarchies lies in the nature of the parliament: here it is not elected but aristocratic, composed of the community's most respected elders. The head of government is responsible for day-to-day administration — making operational decisions, assigning tasks, and coordinating activities — and, when necessary, seeks the counsel of the monarchs. In more serious situations, such as cattle theft, conflicts between families, or the threat of war with other peoples, it falls to him to summon the assembly. The spiritual leader, the shaman, occupies a role that, by way of comparison, bears some resemblance to that of the Archbishop of Canterbury in the United Kingdom, combining religious authority with symbolic legitimacy. This political and religious arrangement predominates, with local variations: some peoples have a single king, such as the Banna, while others have as many as four, as among the Arbore.

II

An expedition to the Omo Valley and Lake Turkana demands far more than patience and good humor. Obsessive planning is essential — and so is building enough flexibility into the itinerary to act fast when the unexpected happens, which, in sub-Saharan Africa, it does with the regularity of sunrise. More than once, we had to improvise a new plan from one hour to the next alongside our guide, Shigo Ayele, a thirty-year-old Banna with a captivating smile and the soul of a philosopher. After visiting the Suri, for instance, we were supposed to head next into Mursi territory. But only hours before we were due to leave, the Mursi went to war with the Bodi. It was ugly. Reports coming in over WhatsApp spoke of at least eight deaths near the town of Jinka, in the highlands of the southern Ethiopian Plateau. As if that were not enough, Ethiopia's Ministry of Health had just declared the region the epicenter of an outbreak of Marburg virus disease, a severe and often fatal viral hemorrhagic fever with symptoms similar to Ebola. In other words: forget it. We're getting out of here. Time to find out whether some ritual is taking place at least a day's journey away.

Patience. The distances are long. And the checkpoints do nothing to help: makeshift barriers marked by scraps of cloth tied together and controlled by local defense forces, always hoping for a little cash. Six, eight, ten hours being tossed around inside the 4x4s. Our expedition has two of them. One is loaded with camping tents, food, cooking equipment, drinking water, and an assortment of indistinguishable but indispensable gear. The photographer Kity Ramos, the cook, and the guide ride in that one. The other carries sleeping mats, personal luggage, more drinking water, our director — photojournalist and editor Valdemir Cunha — and me.

Without a sense of humor, it is wiser to give up. The ability to keep your spirits light is tested constantly — and the evening bath is one of the day's final trials. Here is the thing. The idea of bathing with two two-liter PET bottles and returning clean to the tent may sound perfectly reasonable, but it does not quite work that way. A sadistic wind promptly coats the body in fine sand, and there goes the dream of stretching out on the sleeping mat with fresh, clean skin. Through the night, you have to draw once again on that reserve of stubborn cheerfulness — or cheerful resilience. Torrents of sweat stream

down the face and chest, forming salty pools on pillow and sheet. There is every chance that the ubiquitous ants will leave the “victim” covered in little red bumps that will itch fiercely for days. Curse? Hurl unspeakable blasphemies at African deities? No. None of that. Smile. Make a joke — one of our favorites was to plan a package of small pleasures for the following day: shiatsu, scallops, oysters, and Chablis, as though any of it were possible.

But not everything demands endurance and sacrifice. The night sky alone makes the hardships worthwhile. The Milky Way brushes the darkness with glittering dust, lending it a trace of unreality. Millions of stars blink brazenly, inviting us into a hypnotic journey. On moonless nights, the planets command the sky. Venus stands out at once, intense and close. Jupiter appears higher up, massive with light. Mars reveals itself in a rust-colored hue, isolated in the void, dry, almost mineral. The closer the constellations seem to draw to our eyes, the more consciousness slips away. Time passes slowly here because it carries eternity.

And then, in the morning, our guide receives encouraging news: a Hamar community is making the final preparations for the most important ritual of the year, the bull-jumping ceremony, the Ukuli Bula, which marks young men’s passage into adulthood. So, after a few hours on asphalt, we turn onto climbing tracks that hardly deserve to be called “roads.” The vehicles have to negotiate rocky obstacles, great blocks of stone jutting from the mountain route. The landscape, an inventory of dryness and silence, is punctuated by thorn bushes, wild fig trees, different species of acacia, and great stands of aloe vera. Every so often, a desert rose appears, like a Chopin flourish in a Bach symphony.

By late morning, we begin to pass people on foot. Solitary men carry their machetes not by the handles but by the blades, while chewing small pieces of stripped yirgma twigs, the plant that keeps their teeth clean and intensely white. Women balance jerry cans of water on their heads or strap them to their backs, almost always with children beside them. Herds of goats are driven by young shepherds carrying sticks. After an hour and forty minutes of climbing, the sound of machinery comes as a shock in a place where the ear has heard only elemental sounds. Powered by a car battery, a grain mill operates in the middle of a thatched-roof shelter supported by thick branches planted vertically in the ground, with wide gaps between them. A man and a young woman who could grace the cover of Vogue feed the machine a mixture of sorghum and millet — the basis of the daily porridge and the local home-brewed beer known as borde. The mill belongs to the community. Everyone in the village processes their grain here.

Set in a highland valley enclosed by an immense ring of mountains, the village of Gurmi does not follow the usual pattern of dwellings clustered close together and set some distance from the fields of grain, coffee, and tobacco. The huts resemble the grain-mill shelter in their architecture, though the gaps between the bare branches supporting the structures are narrower. They form small family compounds, each at least three hundred meters from its nearest neighbor. It is as though every family had its own little homestead. In one of the communal areas, an enormous thatched shelter has been built to accommodate visitors. We arrive in Gurmi just as groups of guests begin to be welcomed — a few bring gifts: young bulls, goats, honey, bracelets. The population, around three hundred people, will more than double over the next few days.

The Ukuli Bula is a production on a grand scale. It mobilizes the entire community. Work teams are organized well in advance. One group is responsible for vats of beans and flour — yes, beans with sorghum flour, eaten as little balls shaped in the palm of the hand. Another looks after the prodigious quantities of coffee, which must be served

continuously. Half a dozen men ensure an uninterrupted supply of beer and the extremely potent sorghum arak — quite different in flavor from traditional Middle Eastern arak, distilled from grapes and flavored with anise. There is a staff charged with welcoming and settling groups from other villages. And even a small detachment whose sole mission is to ensure the well-being of the elderly.

"Beyond the rite of passage itself, the festival is essential because it reminds us that no one here can survive alone," says Busko Oyta, one of the community's leaders, thought to be forty-seven — thought to be, because in Omo–Turkana few people have birth certificates. Oyta's voice is barely more than a whisper. He is squatting, his right foot planted on the hot ground strewn with dry leaves; his left heel hovers above the earth, as though he were poised to flex his calf and rise. He will remain like this for nearly forty minutes. Like every Hamar, Oyta has chosen his own way of adorning himself. He wears a many-stranded necklace of yellow and red beads, a mustache and goatee, and displays a precise geometry of hair: the sides of his head are shaved; the top is divided into two sections — a triangle in front and a square behind. Over his short, tightly curled hair, these two sections are coated with colored clay, giving the whole arrangement an almost sculptural quality. Busko Oyta will explain to us the traditions of his people and every ritual stage of the Ukuli Bula.

The groups that continue to arrive from other Hamar villages are greeted festively by women blowing horns and jumping, setting the rattles tied around their ankles ringing. Many of the guests have walked for more than twenty-four hours to reach Gurmi, yet they show no sign of fatigue, though they hurry to eat and drink. Everything is colorful, vibrant, noisy; smoke from the fires keeping the vats hot stings our eyes; children crowd around us, curious, wanting to understand what we are doing here; the sun is a hammer striking without mercy; one woman dances as though possessed by a mischievous demon, arching herself and thrusting her body to within millimeters of the men; PET bottles of homemade arak pass from mouth to mouth; now a nine-syllable chant joins the percussion of the rattles; and then the whipping begins.

The scenes of women being whipped are paralyzing. We watch closely. A striking young woman, her short hair arranged in fine braids, approaches a visibly strong man and hands him a switch — a thin, stripped branch from an endemic tree known here as braza, a local name unrecorded in botanical manuals. She stands before him. He lashes her across the back, already marked by scars from previous rituals. The music does not stop. The other women repeat the same choreography, summoning other men to do the same. There is no visible hesitation, no retreat, even when blood begins to run down their backs. It goes on. More lashes, more blood, more arak. Already whipped, they step before men who have not yet struck them — and are lashed again, and again, and again. Some complain when the blows are too light. They want them hard, for real. Only the elderly women remain apart, seated in the shelter reserved for visitors, talking and smiling beneath a roof made from leafy braza branches.

What does this ritual mean, one that to us seems senseless, cruel, and outrageous? Busko Oyta senses our bewilderment. Calmly, he explains that the lashes of the Ukuli Bula belong not to the language of punishment, but to the language of memory. Pain, he says, fixes commitments in place. By submitting voluntarily to the blows, a woman affirms loyalty, courage, and a moral claim that need never be spoken aloud. Although many men wield the switch, the commitment is made in the name of the three young men who will leap over the bulls tomorrow. They — and their lineages — become bound to those marks. If scarcity, conflict, illness, or abandonment should come later, the woman need

only remember that her body has already paid a price. The scars require no explanation: whoever was supported with blood at the decisive threshold into adulthood must give back when called upon. This is how Busko Oyta describes the pact — a wordless agreement in which pain endured now gives legitimacy to claims made in the future.

Although witnessing the whipping was disturbing, later, after climbing the mountain to the summit where our tents had been pitched, we remember that the practice is not unique to this culture. In fact, it belongs to an ancient and widespread logic. In different parts of the world, traditional peoples entrust to the skin what others record on paper. Among the Dinka and Nuer of South Sudan, scarification confers the right to marry, own cattle, and have a political voice; among the Māori, moko inscribes genealogy, prestige, and rights to land; in the highlands of New Guinea, initiation scars confer protection and belonging. The design changes, the symbolic vocabulary changes, but the principle remains: pain legitimizes, the mark bears witness, and the body itself becomes a contract.

III

The tents are about to take flight. The wind erupts in piercing gusts, like a G-sharp from Miles Davis's trumpet. The support crew rushes to our aid, reinforcing the tents with guy lines fastened to stakes driven deeper into the stony ground. It does not work. Our camp is a breath away from coming apart when another arrangement is tried: the 4x4s are brought up alongside the tents to form a wall against the wind. It does not solve the problem, but it helps. At last, we manage to rest a little. Actually sleeping, though, is another story.

When we return to the heart of the action in Gurmi, we discover that no one here seems to have needed any rest. The celebration has carried on through the night and into the early hours. Conversation circles, dancing, coffee, beans with flour, music, arak, and borde are everywhere. We are told that the most important guest has gone down to the stream, and we hurry after him. The maza is a striking young man, tall, a black mass of muscle. Maza is the title given to initiated young men in search of a bride. During the Ukuli Bula season, from September to January, at least five hundred of them travel from village to village across Hamar territory, meeting young women ready for marriage and their families. By tradition, the communities must welcome them and provide shelter and food. With one detail: they may consume only milk, coffee, honey, meat, and blood. According to an ancient belief, this diet makes them more handsome, virile, and strong, and gives their skin a lustrous sheen. Judging by appearances, it works. The maza we find is busy preparing two goats for roasting. One has already been cut into large pieces, arranged over the coals on slender skewers. With a short knife, visibly none too sharp, he skins the second goat. Between tasks, he drinks blood from an enormous gourd — so large that he has to hold it with both hands. Once the work is done, the meat is left to roast slowly beside the stream, and the suitor, now the focus of female attention, returns to the celebration.

The maza has an entourage, a small group of young men appointed by the host community's leaders to assist him and obey his orders. In the visitors' shelter, these attendants organize the line of women who flock there to offer the festival's heartthrob copious amounts of honey. The maza receives the full gourds and takes a few sips from each. At a certain point, he can drink no more and simply passes them on to his attendants. One of them sits behind the maza, practically pressed against him, encircling him

with outstretched arms and legs. As with everything in the Ukuli Bula, the gesture is laden with meaning. What to our eyes might suggest a strangely intimate physical closeness is, in fact, a way of maintaining the dignified stillness expected of a fully initiated man. The human brace steadies the maza's torso, keeps him from falling backward, and helps him maintain his balance when dizziness and fatigue set in. The young man, after all, is subjected to relentless physical demands: he consumes liters of honey, some of it fermented; he is exposed to the sun and to social pressure; he has no breaks to rest — one ritual stage flows straight into the next, keeping him constantly in motion, receiving offerings and interacting with dozens of people. The extreme physical proximity of the young man supporting him also expresses a bodily etiquette of hierarchy: the attendant reduces physical distance to an absolute minimum as a sign of total availability. As the central figure in an event charged with emotion and performance, the maza embodies male prestige, potency, and erotic display — erotic in the social sense of attraction, rather than as an explicit sexual appeal.

Over the next hour, attention will shift to the three young men about to face the bull jump, the rite that seals their passage into adulthood. They are brothers: Bare, twenty; Shumalle, thirteen; and Ello, twelve. Bare is late — he should have faced the challenge at least three years ago — while the younger two are ahead of schedule. The reason for this mismatch is practical: the family could not afford more than one celebration. Each of the three carries a small wooden phallus tucked into the waistband of the cloth wrapped around his body like a skirt. It is no gratuitous ornament. The insignia explicitly anticipates what the ritual will sanction — entry into the world of men eligible for marriage and reproduction. Before the jump, the boys do not yet fully occupy that role; they wear the adornment, so to speak, as a visible promise. Here, the body speaks through symbols: it states, without equivocation, what is at stake. In preparation for the challenge, the maza and his attendants lead a rite in which the three brothers relinquish the small phalluses and make their way to the open ground where the men of the community are gathering the bulls from the village herd.

The animals to be used in the trial are selected, and the most unruly are given a natural sedative — leaves from a plant called gale. The women's dance, with leaps and rattles beating out the rhythm, advances toward the bulls. Groups of five to ten people scatter across the hillside in search of the best vantage points. More people arrive as the jumping is about to begin. Five bulls are lined up, each restrained by two men — one in front holding the horns, the other behind gripping the tail. Completely naked, Bare runs thirty meters, launches himself into the air, plants his right foot on the back of the first bull and, from there, runs across the others, one foot after another. The women blow their horns louder, leap with greater force, quicken the choreography. Bare makes the second crossing, now in the opposite direction. He succeeds, then again on the third and the fourth. On the fifth, as he lands, he wavers; he may fall. In a fraction of a second, the maza moves toward him, ready to catch him. Bare extends his arms, waves away the help, regains his balance, and carries on. The final two crossings — seven in all — are flawless.

The nudity required for the trial represents a state of tabula rasa. In making the leap, the young man leaves childhood and the protection of his family behind. He enters the ritual as a child, with no possessions, in order to be "born" as a man and future warrior. Appearing naked before the entire village also exposes vulnerability ("I am not perfect, and one day I will need the support of the community") and demonstrates courage ("I am willing to face every challenge"). There is a practical aspect as well: clothing or fabric could become entangled in the horns, backs, or legs of the lined-up bulls, causing

serious accidents at a moment of extreme tension. As for the number of crossings, there is no universal rule. In different ritual contexts, numbers such as three, four, or seven often appear in association with the idea of completeness.

Now it is Bare's brothers' turn. Shumalle completes the trial, though somewhat awkwardly, wavering from side to side. Ello needs assistance because of a physical condition that impairs the movement of one leg. Once the jumping is over, the animals are led away and the men parade with AK-47 rifles in a display of the Hamar people's power to defend themselves against potential adversaries. To a call-and-response chant, the line snakes across the hillside. Relics of African guerrilla conflicts once supplied by the Soviet Union, the rifles are wielded like clubs and thrust into the air in sharp, coordinated movements. The younger men, who have no firearms, parade with machetes.

The rituals demanding rigor or solemnity are over. Now the Ukuli Bula erupts into a lively dance charged with explicit sensuality. The young women line up facing the young men, fifty meters away. They jump forward with both feet and, when they draw close, thrust their pelvises until they almost touch them; the men mirror the movement. The two lines pull apart, only to converge again moments later. At one point the men advance; at another, the women. Then the erotic game ceases to be collective and continues in pairs or trios. Two young men, each with an arm resting on the other's shoulder, hop forward until they stop just inches from the women who have caught their interest — then thrust their pelvises toward the space between the women's thighs, while the women perform the same choreography. Everyone sings and keeps up the game, trying different partners over the course of an hour and a half.

Throughout the festival, Kity, Valdemir, and I — the only Western guests — become something of an attraction ourselves. Groups of young people follow us to listen to our conversations; boys and girls press into an indistinguishable mass around the photographers to see the images the moment they are taken; Bare sticks close to Kity, eager to understand how the cameras work. As we say goodbye, Busko Oyta tells us that, in some way, we too have played a part in the Ukuli Bula by documenting the event — a selection of photographs will be sent to the community. "Now you are part of our history."

IV

A fluid containing sodium, potassium, calcium, and other inorganic compounds is hurled like a liquid slingshot shot toward Kity Ramos's left cheek. A fraction of a second later, the spit hits her face, and Kity recoils in surprise. Why? From what we were told in the Turkana community of Loyangalani, Kenya, the diviner specializes in seeing the future, deciphering dreams, and interpreting messages from the ancestors by reading sandals tossed at random. He begins receiving people early in the morning, and the first consultation opens with the coffee ceremony, the bunna. And here is Kity, inside the priest's hut, where late in the afternoon he awaits her squatting on the ground. He is elaborately adorned, with a headband, necklace, bracelets, and colorful bangles. His elongated profile, slender and slightly projecting nose, well-defined chin, and a certain linear elegance to his face evoke something of the aesthetic found in depictions of Pharaoh Akhenaten. He greets Kity with a nod and begins the procedure. With his right hand, he presses the sandals sole to sole, strikes them once against the sand, raises them to chest height, then lets them fall to the ground. He repeats the operation four times. After each fall, he pinches a

tiny amount of sand between his right thumb and forefinger and scatters it over the sandals, so worn and hardened they look as though they were made of wood. Then he traces lines across them with his index finger, speaking aloud what he reads. When the interpretation is complete, he looks at Kity — and spits.

To the Turkana, the gesture does not signify contempt; quite the opposite. It is a ritual act charged with positive meaning, associated with blessing, protection, the transmission of vital force, and wishes for prosperity and health. In some rites, elders spit on newborns, the sick, and newlyweds. Saliva acts as a symbolic "seal," capable of warding off the evil eye or negative influences. The diviner's spit was a kind of physical confirmation of his interpretation, the "stamp" placed upon the prognosis he had just delivered. There is also the idea that something of the seer himself — his energy, his wisdom — is transmitted through saliva.

The same people who consult the sandal diviner attend Catholic Mass on Sundays. The celebrant delivers his sermon in the shade of an immense acacia, less than a kilometer from the village, amid the stony landscape of the Chalbi Desert on the shores of Lake Turkana. A large group of women listens attentively, seated on green plastic chairs. They wear every imaginable color and voluminous beaded collars that rise from the base of the neck to the line of the chin; heavy hoops hang from pierced ears, and their hair is shaved at the sides, with fine braids set with red clay falling on either side, some ending in shells tied to their tips. Two teenagers armed with staffs try to keep the younger children seated on the ground, not always successfully — even at the risk of a whack, many get up to run and play. The preacher speaks into a microphone connected to a loudspeaker and delivers a nonlinear sermon, interrupting his homily whenever four female worshippers gather around him to lead a musical sequence, at which point the congregation rises. At the end of the service, the women form a large circle and begin an ancestral dance, singing to a rhythm marked by clapping, an ancient Turkana practice. Across Africa, Christian liturgies commonly incorporate elements of traditional animist cultures. Unlike most peoples in the region, the Turkana converted to Christianity, but fashioned their own syncretic version of the faith.

After the dance, the women return to the village in single file, each carrying her green chair on her head. It is a procession of color, the necklaces erupting against the gray-yellow landscape. Far from being mere adornment, the necklaces serve as visible biographies — signaling age, alliances, prestige, and belonging. Married women of higher status also wear leaf-shaped earrings made by their husbands and a slender necklace with a metal key as a pendant. The adornments are never removed. Not even for sleep. To prevent chafing, the women rub goat fat onto their necks.

The same animal fat, sometimes mixed with reddish ochre or fine ash, is used by the community for bodily hygiene. The daily bath — so closely associated, for us, with ideas of cleanliness and civility — simply does not occupy the same symbolic place here. Fresh water is scarce across much of the territory, and Lake Turkana, highly alkaline and brackish, is unsuitable for washing. Applied to the skin, the greasy paste reduces cracking caused by the harsh climate and helps keep at bay the dust that clings to the body throughout the day. To the hurried eye of an outsider, the local custom might look like dirt or neglect; in the context of the Chalbi Desert and the arid landscapes surrounding Lake Turkana, it is instead an ancient and practical adaptation to an environment where drinking water is a precious resource.

Heading north, the 4x4s cut through the desert along routes indecipherable to us when, in the distance, a noisy gathering catches our attention. As we draw closer, we

discover that this is the third day of a wedding celebration — the fourth will be the last. The bride and groom sit in the shade of a tree, on the hide of the camel whose meat will be roasted for the guests.

Beneath the sparse canopy of a myrrh tree, the men watch the festivities seated on their ekicholos — tiny handcrafted and decorated stools that also serve as headrests — with staffs resting between their legs, some adorned with colorful beads. They have gone to extraordinary lengths with their appearance. They wear pink shawls and hats crowned with ostrich feathers and, not infrequently, sunglasses with extravagantly oversized white frames, giving them an unexpectedly pop air amid the dusty landscape. The younger men wear Melissa-style plastic sandals and colorful socks pulled almost to the knees. Between one comment and the next, many discreetly point their phones at us and take our picture.

A few meters away, the women dance in the shade of a fig tree. Dozens alternate straight vertical jumps with a choreography of hips thrust forward and back. At one point, the entire group begins circling while couples take turns in the center. Some of those arriving join the circle; others dance alongside it. Later, the women form a line and move slowly toward the bride and groom, as though the music itself were pushing the procession through the desert dust.

A Turkana marriage is not simply the union of two people. Above all, it is a negotiation between families, involving livestock and alliances that may endure for generations. For days, the men discuss how many goats, cattle, and camels are to be given as bridewealth, while the women sing, dance, and prepare food. Nothing here is hurried. The elders talk at length, seated on the sand, weighing not only the groom's ability to increase the herd but also the prestige of his lineage. It falls to them to bless the agreement reached between the families. Once the commitment is sealed, animals are sacrificed, and blood, still warm, spills onto the dry earth.

Across the Omo–Turkana complex, blood carries an immense weight of symbolic meaning. It is food, covenant, spiritual protection, and proof of courage. Herders from different peoples, away from their villages for weeks in search of grazing for their livestock, drink blood as a nutritional supplement rich in iron, protein, and mineral salts. Blood is drawn from the neck of a living animal with a precisely aimed arrow to the jugular vein, after which the wound is sealed with clay or ash. Among several groups, anything regarded as truly serious or decisive must be consecrated in blood. The Hamar perform sacrifices to appease malevolent entities. Among the Kwegu, the firstborn son of a dead person deemed unworthy must kill a goat, cut open its belly, and plunge his hand into the animal's blood. Some alliances become legitimate only when those involved cut their own thumbs and press them together. In the donga — the stick fight that marks the Suri young men's rite of passage — combatants are expected to draw blood from one another.

Few substances carry such a weight of meaning. Blood is at once biological matter and an absolute metaphor for life. It flows unseen beneath the skin, but the moment it emerges, it becomes dramatic: it reveals birth, violence, kinship, sacrifice, illness, desire, death. Perhaps this is why so many cultures have associated it with what is most essential in human beings — vital force, lineage, soul, or spiritual energy. The recurrence of blood in such different rituals expresses an almost universal human perception that life in its fullest sense demands communion, sacrifice, and sharing. Blood becomes the tangible representation of the invisible bond linking individuals, ancestors, divinities, and communities. It is no coincidence that, in the Eucharist, the faithful also symbolically "ingest" divine life. The Christian sacrament, too, contains the idea that life can pass between beings through a sacred substance.

V

North of Turkana country, heading toward the Ethiopian border, we encounter the Gabbra, prosperous camel herders. It is the time of the new moon, a season of festivities and weddings, and the women make a triumphant appearance. Great, light, translucent veils billow above their heads, stirred by the languid wind, creating a striking spectacle — like sails filled with wind, gliding across the exhausted earth. The fabrics blaze with intense colors — red, purple, black, lilac, magenta — combined with geometric patterns and ornamental bands of gold or white. The overall effect mingles pastoral elegance, theatricality, and a sophisticated response to the conditions of the desert. There is something sculptural about these elongated figures, as though the fabric itself extended their bodies into space. The extraordinary beauty of the women lends the scene an almost dreamlike quality. The men, too, are notably vain — as, indeed, they are throughout the Omo–Turkana region. Local custom calls for shaving the eyebrows and decorating the area around the eyes with colorful ornaments.

We are in North Horr. The Gabbra here are Christian, although religion seems less a closed system of belief than a slow sedimentation of spiritual layers accumulated over centuries. Farther on, the name of Allah already echoes through many villages, and masonry mosques rise in settlements once marked only by pastoral encampments. Yet beneath the monotheistic surface, traces of an older cosmology remain alive, linked to Waaqa — the supreme divinity associated with the sky, rain, and the order of the world — and to the power of the ancestors. It is not unusual for men who recite verses from the Bible or the Quran to attribute prolonged droughts to the disruption of ancient spiritual balances or to seek protection from the dead of their lineage. Different religious systems often coexist without any need for mutual exclusion, as though spirituality could expand through addition rather than replacement.

Even so, Muslim proselytism has been advancing into remote areas, propelled by agricultural research and social projects funded by the governments of Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. The money arrives, and local authorities often reciprocate by granting permits for the construction of mosques and madrasas — Quranic schools. And so, beside the main route into Karo territory, a sky-blue mosque stands strangely at odds with the landscape. Few people go there. The Karo preserve their animist traditions, grounded in the idea that nature is animate: mountains, animals, plants, rivers, seas, wind, and rain possess souls — in a definition that is, necessarily, simplified here.

Compared with the territories inhabited by most peoples of the Omo–Turkana system, the land settled by the Karo is practically a Promised Land. It is a cool, gentle region along the Omo River, at a point where the valley narrows, holds the moisture of seasonal floods, and enriches the soil with dark, dense sediment. Myth tells that, in time immemorial, the people lived in the mountains until a sacred bull guided them to this place. We pitch our camp beside the river, beneath enormous trees with dense canopies, on a well-ventilated strip of riparian forest. A luxury.

We are less than a kilometer from the village of Dus, on the Ethiopian side of the valley that stretches toward Lake Turkana in Kenya. The moment we arrive in the community, a surprise: girls playing soccer with boys. It is unusual. Across sub-Saharan Africa, male and female spheres are generally kept well apart, each devoted to specific tasks: men tend the animals, build fences, granaries, and houses, and take responsibility for security and defense; women are responsible for activities involving children and food

— which is why they fetch water from the wells and firewood for cooking. It is common to see men gathered in one place and women in another. Even in public markets, usually held once a week in a large open space where several villages converge, the division by gender is clearly marked. The great rituals provide opportunities to meet, and it is there that couples form. In Dus, however, things are just a little different: we come across several conversation circles where men and women mingle.

Despite this unusual degree of interaction, marriages in which bride and groom have never met are not uncommon. Unions between people from different villages seal important agreements of cooperation over land use, herds, and the management of resources. When negotiations begin, the groom's head is shaved and he is forbidden to interact with anyone. He remains secluded in a hut, with meals left at the door. His father has the final word: he accepts or rejects the prospective daughter-in-law and, if he approves, begins negotiating the bridewealth. Madja Gucho, a dazzling seventeen-year-old Black Helen, six feet tall, will move to her future husband's village in exchange for a handsome bridewealth: ten cows, thirty goats, and two AK-47s — on the black market, each rifle trades for six hundred dollars, a small fortune; in times of conflict, the price can triple.

Although she has yet to meet her future husband, Madja walks around smiling, poised, her face decorated with tiny white dots reminiscent of a guinea fowl's plumage. She wears a kind of cowhide tunic studded with shells, leaving her breasts bare. In Karo culture, beauty is defined not by physical features but by adornment, body painting, and scarification. Beauty does not necessarily belong to someone slender, with elegant features and a graceful gait, but to whoever is most painted, most richly adorned, most colorful. Minimalism and restraint have no place here. On her wedding day, Madja will be taken to the groom's village, where she will begin her new life. Before the festivities, there will be ceremonial weeping as she takes leave of family and friends.

Friendship is one of the pillars of the Karo system of values. The language itself, spoken by a population of about five thousand, gives expression to this principle. For example, beltamo is the friend we might call "ordinary"; ädamo is the friend-brother, someone who belongs to a family not bound by blood. Friends — of either kind — are relied upon in every circumstance, without exception. Perhaps the combination of strong social bonds and a fertile, welcoming habitat lies behind the luminous joy that struck us in Dus.

After crossing much of the Omo Valley and reaching the Banna villages, the impression is similar. In the community of Zini, the land is equally generous: a wide variety of grains and fruits are cultivated, and the leaders of the four clans gather beneath a canopy of flowering trees for leisurely conversations that sometimes stretch to three hours around a fire. Banna men are known for their skill on stilts. The group of seven who welcome us clown around on poles nearly four meters high, singing a festive song as they stride across a field of teff — a grain native to Ethiopia and the basis of the flour used to make injera, the traditional dish resembling a large brown crepe. Although the display is part of the welcome staged for our arrival, the stilts have practical uses. The Banna first began using them to gather fruit from tall trees and to spot animals that had strayed from the herd, sometimes hidden by high grass and invisible to anyone looking from ground level.

The colorful world of the Karo and the Banna finds its antithesis in the brown world of the Nyangatom. In the settlement of Kangaten, home to 350 people, everything is brown: the earth, the parched air, the light. We camp at the edge of a canyon more than a hundred meters deep, a corridor carved through the desert. Far below, a thread of brown water; brown goats drinking; boys stained with brown dust tending the herd. In the middle of the night, restless from the heat, I get up and notice that the clothes left

on the floor of the tent are warm. I step outside for a short walk beneath the golden glow of an enchanting full moon. I do not go far. When I take what seems to be the way back, doubt sets in: wasn't this the thorn bush I was supposed to walk around? Wasn't that large rock on the right? Better try to follow my footprints. But I no longer know which ones are mine. Time passes. I am lost. I know the camp cannot be far away, but the elements of the landscape are indistinguishable, everything repeating in a disorienting visual loop. Then I hear voices and footsteps. Two herders are walking quickly, staffs in hand, speaking softly. Through gestures, I manage to ask whether they have seen our group's tents and vehicles. They point me toward camp.

In the morning, Kangaten's leader receives us for a conversation. Luwasa is about fifty years old, has five wives and twenty children. His skin bears scarifications denoting prestige; his right ear is notched, and a thick necklace of colored beads circles his neck. I settle the stool I am offered into a sliver of shade beside one of the oval thatched houses and ask him what worries him most. Luwasa does not mention the drought, the recent friction that the young warriors have stirred up with the neighboring Turkana, or the difficulty of trading goats and honey for medicine and other manufactured goods at the public market fourteen kilometers away. What truly concerns him, he says, is keeping the children on the path of the ancestors. His words are firm:

"Our children and grandchildren must receive the teachings of the ancestors and observe the rites. The Catholics arrive with humanitarian aid, but their real intention is to catechize the children. That is not right. If their God is the true one, then let him make it rain. There is no such legend of heaven and hell. The dead do not go to those distant places. When a person dies, they become invisible, but remain among us. We can turn to them when necessary, ask for guidance. The earth speaks to us too. When the earth whispers, we must be ready to listen. The earth tells us where there is water. It tells us when the harvest will be good and when rain, disease, and plagues will come. If Christianity interferes with our beliefs, we will no longer be able to hear the earth."

Syncretism — so common in Africa and, indeed, across much of the world — is rejected here by Luwasa. He sees the preservation of the ancestors' spiritual inheritance as the foundation of social cohesion. There is, however, an important difference. Ordinarily, when an adherent of a monotheistic religion argues for the strict observance of faith, it is a matter of doctrine. Here, because there is no sacred book setting down rules and precepts, what is expected is consensus around rituals and the founding elements of the cosmogony. In all other respects, each person may believe in their own way — as they learned from their grandparents.

Animist systems are not proselytizing either. No one here wishes to "convert" followers of other religions. And nothing in this realm seems to cause bewilderment except the absence of faith. In the villages of the fifteen peoples we visited, looks of astonishment multiplied whenever I answered yes to the question: "Is it true that, among your people, there are those who believe in no God at all?"

During conversations almost invariably held in the shade of an acacia, at the end of the interviews, surrounded by a circle of elders seated on their ekicholos, staffs lying in the sand, I would reverse the roles: "What would you like to ask?" The recurrence of the same questions in different communities revealed a vision of society in which the individual can only be fully realized as part of a collective body:

"Are there people in your country who live alone?"

"Why do some couples choose not to have children?"

"What are the main collective rituals you practice?"

“Is it really true that some husbands and wives each live in a separate house?”

“We were told that some elderly people live far from their families. Does that really happen?”

In the modern Western tradition, particularly since René Descartes, the individual is taken as the primary unit: the “I” thinks, decides, exists — and only then enters into relationships with others. Society emerges as a kind of sum, or contract, among autonomous individuals. Kenyan theologian and philosopher John Mbiti reverses the axis. For him, in most African societies, the individual does not precede the community — the community gives rise to the individual. There is no isolated “I” that subsequently enters into relationships; there is a “we” within which the “I” takes shape. Mbiti distilled the idea into a celebrated formulation: “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.” The individual, as conceived by the West, is not the point of departure: the individual emerges within a web of family, social, and spiritual relationships — and makes sense only as part of that web.

We learned the lesson firsthand in Gurmi, at the end of the Ukuli Bula. Before leaving Hamar territory, during the final minutes of our conversation with the leaders and elders, Busko Oyta noticed the skeptical glances Kity, Valdemir, and I exchanged when we were introduced to the village diviner, Delti Dayna. At twenty-two, wearing a red visor and layers of beaded necklaces, his hair braided into a small bun held by a blue clip, the playful young man hardly matched the gravity we associated with his role. Descended from a long line of diviners, Dayna told us about his most recent case: a woman suffering from chronic insomnia. He demanded a ceramic pot containing milk, coffee, and tobacco; that night, he carried the offering to the top of a mountain, uttered the necessary incantations, and shattered the pot in homage to Méchi, appeasing the spirit that embodies the essence of evil. That very night, he told us, the woman slept sweetly. Oyta realized that we were not taking the young man seriously. And then, courteously, he explained a fundamental idea: “Here, who you are matters little. What truly matters is where you come from.”

As we left the village, dust rose once more behind the tires, gradually covering the footprints, the shrubs, the stones, and the immediate memory of the road. It was the same dust that, at the beginning of the journey, had seemed our enemy. Now, however, it did more than blind; it also preserved. It covered the signs so that only those who belonged to that land would know how to read them. Perhaps that is why the peoples of Omo–Turkana do not first ask someone’s name. They ask what dust they carry on their feet.

Kaíke Nanne *is a journalist and writer. He has traveled extensively around the world to spend time with traditional communities and research Indigenous peoples. He has worked as a reporter, editor, and editorial director for magazines including Veja, Época, Claudia, Playboy, and Os Caminhos da Terra, and served as a publisher at Abril, Time Warner, and HarperCollins Brasil. He is the author of Como dançar com os mortos — Uma jornada por cinco continentes em busca da sabedoria ancestral (Maquinaria Editorial) and Akuntsú — Depois do fim (Editora Origem). Nanne was born in Olinda, Pernambuco, and lives in São Paulo.*

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Her work is rooted in the conviction that these communities sustain ways of understanding the world that endure despite the pressures of violence, climate change, and the expansion of global culture. Rather than portraying them as remnants of a distant past, her photographs seek to reveal the continuing relevance of these traditions and the vitality of the ways of life they sustain.

Kity seeks to bring audiences closer to forms of knowledge that, across much of the West, have gradually faded with urbanization and modernity. Taken together, her photographs form a broad portrait of humanity's cultural diversity and invite viewers to reflect on heritage, memory, and belonging.

Her major personal projects include Pescadores de Myanmar, winner of the Essay category at Paraty em Foco 2025, and As Grandes Guardiãs, which placed third in the same category at the festival, with part of the essay published in the November 2024 issue of Unquiet magazine.

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