

Jumping from Boyhood to Manhood



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

After visiting the Mursi people, we returned to Jinka and went to Turmi, deeper into the Lower Omo Valley. We arrived at 3.30 in the afternoon. A tour guide from the Turmi Evangadi Youth Association told us we had come at the right time as a Bull Jumping Ritual would be taking place in that evening.

Turmi is a small village with a handful of shops and very basic hotels. It is one of the two places with a high concentration of Hamer people; the other is Dimeka, less than 20km away. The Hamer is one of the 16 colourful ethnic groups in the Lower Omo Valley. They are subsistence agropastoralists and there are only about 46,500 of them.

We left at 4 p.m. in a 4WD to watch the Bull Jumping Ritual which would be held at a venue 12km away. Our guide was John Workineh, a 19-year-old Hamer youth who had earlier collected a guide fee of 300 birr and a visiting fee of 600 birr per person.

After driving 30 minutes along a very bumpy dirt road, we reached a place in the bush that was later filled with many other cars. We got out of the vehicle and walked another 30 minutes to an open space where a crowd had gathered, including camera-wielding tourists. There were a few village huts nearby with thatched cone-shaped roofs. My wife and I seemed to be the only non-Caucasian tourists.

The Bull Jumping Ritual does not take place regularly. It only happens when a Hamer boy is ready to go through a test that will mark his transition from boy to man. Sometimes several boys may do the Bull Jumping together. This ritual is also practised by the Banna people, another ethnic group in the Lower Omo Valley.



The boy going through the ritual that day was being prepared and given advice by close relatives, friends and village elders. Some girls and women were dancing, singing and blowing horns. They had rubbed a mixture of ochre, water and resin into their hair which they then twisted into shinning, copper-coloured tresses. They also decorated their bodies with beads/metal necklaces and wore bands around their arms, wrists and ankles as well as a string of bells on their lower legs. Some of them wore beaded head-bands too.

On the other hand, the men had shaved their heads, wore loincloths and a colourful striped T-shirt. They also decorated themselves with necklaces, head-bands, arm-bands, wrist-bands and ankle-bands as well as carried a borkoto, a unique headrest known as which doubled as a stool.

While waiting for the bull jumping to start, we witnessed a very astonishing practice. Some girls expressed their devotion to boys by asking the men to whip them hard

with a twig; the harder they were whipped, the greater their devotion it seemed; they did not even groan from the pain. I saw bleeding arms and backs. Old wounds on the backs of some women had turned into thick calluses.

Finally after much anticipation, the Bull Jumping started after sunset. A group of cattle had been rounded up and placed tightly side by side with men holding their horns and tails to keep them still. The boy, now stark naked, ran and jumped on the back of the first animal, keeping his arms stretched out to maintain his balance. He continued to run till the last animal and then jumped down to the ground. With barely a few seconds to catch his breath, he turned around and repeated the feat in the opposite direction. After 4 times, he was deemed to have crossed the hurdle from boyhood to manhood.

As a man, he was now free to choose his bride, possibly from among the girls who had offered themselves for a whipping earlier. ■