

# All in the Name of Beauty



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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.*

**M**an's perception of beauty changes with time and differs from location to location.

In the West, the prevailing standard of beauty in a woman is tall and slender but busty with delicate features, perhaps best epitomised by actress Marilyn Monroe. During the Victorian period, however, plump women were considered beautiful, as exemplified by Queen Victoria herself.

A certain minority ethnic group in China believes that, in women, a prominent derriere is associated with reproductive capability and therefore, is most beautiful.

The long-necked Karen women of Myanmar and Thailand wind copper tubes around their necks to make them look longer, which is said to increase their charm.

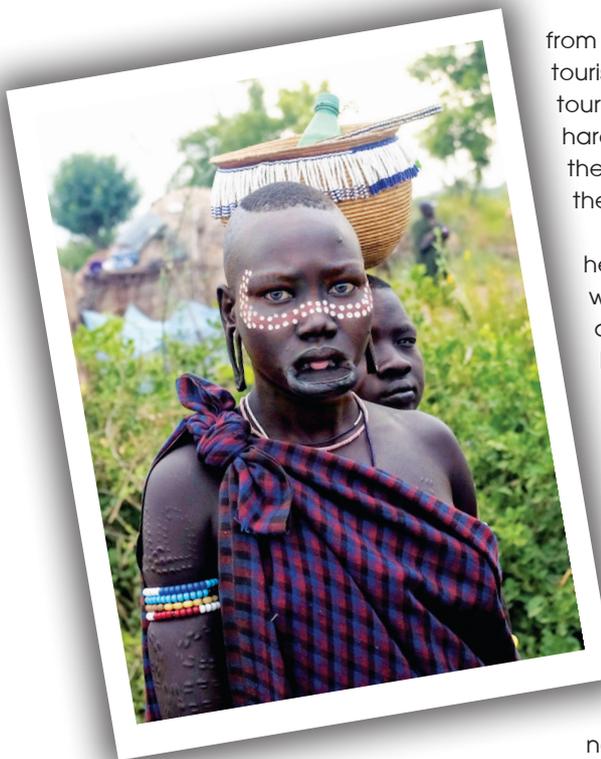
However, whatever yardstick one may adopt to gauge beauty, it is ultimately the beholder's feelings that really matter.

Many years ago, the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur staged a special exhibition on beauty as envisaged by different societies of the world. I was particularly fascinated by the women of a certain African tribe who slit their lower lips and then insert round ceramic plates to enhance their attractiveness; it seems the larger the plate, the more attractive they appear to be!

That was my first acquaintance with the lip-plate people.

While planning the second part of my trip to Ethiopia last year, I was delighted to learn that the lip-plate people actually came from the southern part of that vast country.

In Ethiopia, I chartered a 4WD vehicle with driver to take my wife



and I to all the places in our itinerary. Then on 16 October, we finally came face to face with the lip-plate people in the tiny hamlet of Butena in Mago National Park near Jinka in the lower Omo River Valley.

We had to engage a guide from the Guides Association in Jinka, pay National Park entrance fees for the two of us and the vehicle, and pay entrance fees again to visit the hamlet. All these amounted to a total of 1,084 birr (about RM108). We also had to pay the villagers 5 birr per head if we wanted to photograph them!

My initial exhilaration was thwarted somewhat, but upon deeper reflection, I was convinced that this, perhaps, was the best way the local people could directly reap benefits

from the tourism industry. Usually, tourist spending goes largely to tour companies in big cities and hardly anything filters down to the very people who attract the tourists in the first place.

However, when the headman, a young man who had been to England and who spoke pretty good English, was trying to show me around the hamlet and how his people lived, many women and children kept following me around and pulled on my sleeve to ask me to photograph them. Some men did the same too. They were so poor I reckoned that even 5 birr meant something to them. But this was

not the kind of interaction I had expected from such an isolated community that many people might not have even heard of.

The lip-plate people are the Mursi, a pastoralist ethnic group with a total population of only about 7,500 people, according to Ethiopia's 2007 national census. They live in small, cone-shaped thatched huts and practise polygamy. The hamlet headman I met had 3 wives and 4 children. When the girls reach the age of 15-16, they slit their lower lips to hold a round ceramic or wooden plate. As they grow older, their lower lips become more stretched to hold larger discs.

Yes, I was grateful to have finally met the lip-plate people, but this was one experience I really did not cherish. ■