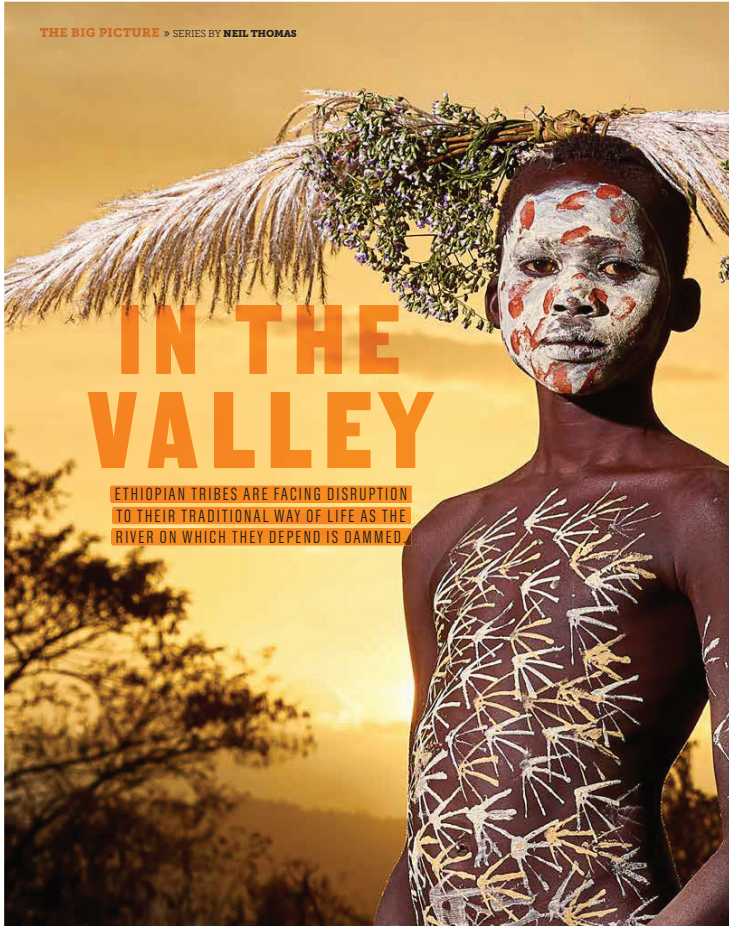


# IN THE VALLEY

ETHIOPIAN TRIBES ARE FACING DISRUPTION TO THEIR TRADITIONAL WAY OF LIFE AS THE RIVER ON WHICH THEY DEPEND IS DAMMED.



THE BANKS of the Omo River in Ethiopia are home to myriad ethnic tribes, each with their own distinctive dress and rituals, who have lived off the land for centuries. The Suri wear unique lip plates, the Mursi bold horn jewellery. The ornately painted Karo, perhaps the region's smallest tribe, often sport elaborate hairstyles or headdresses and ritualistic body scarring. Colourful beaded necklaces and bracelets, stacked silver rings, as well as flowers and feathers abound.

Neil Thomas has visited the valley to photograph its people many times. "Many of them look very different from one another for a few reasons," says Thomas. "There is great pride in appearance, especially among men. The Hamar men believe they have to look their best for the womenfolk. It has also served them well over the years to be able to quickly differentiate from one another. Great pride is taken in raiding other tribes for livestock, so a difference in appearance instantly shows whether you are a friend or a foe."

The Kenyan-born photographer has not only documented a portrait series of these proud people. The unstoppable tide of modern industrialisation threatens their very existence, and photos such as his are a record of a people and way of life on the verge of disappearing.

"There has been a great impact on the tribes as their land becomes more compromised," he says, referring to the massive hydro-electric dam that has been built on the river, and the subsequent commercial plantations and mandatory resettlements that have accompanied it. It has forced some of these tribes, many of whom rely on the river's annual flooding to cultivate food, from their land.

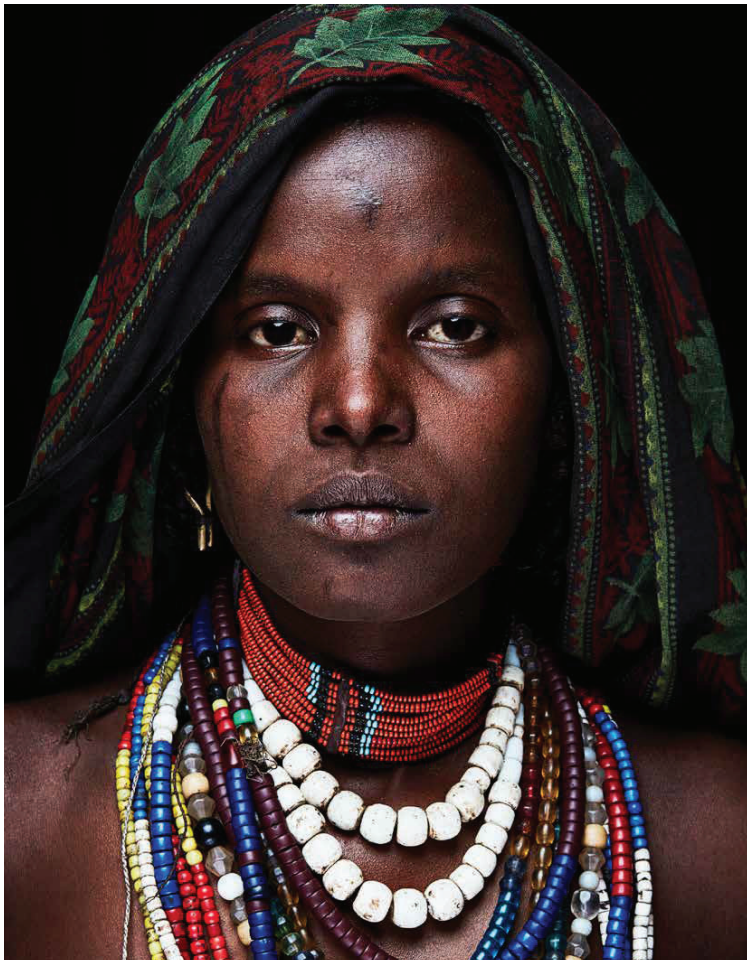
It was important to Thomas that he get to know the people who live in this area.

"We really took our time to try to understand daily life, rituals, and to explore the region. It was a magical time," he says. He wants to ensure that this important part of Ethiopia's history survives, no matter what happens.

"My hope is that I can bring these hard-to-reach places to a wider audience," Thomas adds. "I've been documenting the people and landscapes of the East Africa region for two decades now, [enabling] future generations to see how their forebears lived. With the rapid changes I've seen, I believe this is more important than ever."

by Anastasia Saffolcas (@Anast), Contributing Editor  
See more at [www.neilthomas.com](http://www.neilthomas.com).

A SURI BOY.



RIGHT PAGE: A SURI WOMAN WITH LIP PLATE AND WEDDING PAINT.



RIGHT PAGE: A KARO MAN WITH HIS BARKEN WOODEN FELLOW.



LEFT PAGE: A SURI WOMAN IN TRADITIONAL DRESS.