

**LIFE IN THE HEART OF SOUTHWEST ETHIOPIA: PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS ON THE PASTORAL LIFE OF THE HAMAR PEOPLE****GÜNEYBATI ETİYOPYA'NIN KALBİNDE YAŞAM: HAMAR HALKININ PASTORAL YAŞAMINA YÖNELİK ÖN DEĞERLENDİRMELER**

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**Abstract**

Ethiopia is a country with a rich cultural history spanning thousands of years, where diverse ethnic groups coexist. This study focuses on one example of this diversity, the rural Hamar people in the Lower Omo Valley, which is internationally recognised for its unique cultural practices and ecological richness. The Hamar community is among the diverse ethnic groups in the Southern Omo Region and embodies a pastoral lifestyle closely linked to agro-pastoralism, in which cattle play a central role both culturally and economically. This lifestyle is particularly notable in the region due to its specific cultural practices and economic reliance on cattle. This study presents an in-depth examination of the pastoral lifestyle and traditional practices of the Hamar people in the Lower Omo Valley in southwestern Ethiopia. The aim is to understand the cultural, economic and environmental dynamics underlying the lifestyle of the Hamar and to explore the unique socio-economic structure and ecological adaptation of these villages. The study is also intended to contribute to the sustainability of pastoralism and to the preservation of cultural diversity at both a regional and global level. The use of observer and participant observation techniques also constitutes a preliminary study of the biological aspects of dietary habits, which I intend to examine in depth through the daily practices of the society and to carry out in the field of physical anthropology in the future. Through this research, the paper contributes to the wider discourse on the preservation of Ethiopian culture, highlighting the need to protect the rich heritage of the Hamar community amidst evolving external influences.

**Keywords:** Agro-pastoralism, cultural preservation, Ethiopia, Hamar, traditional practices.

**Öz**

Etiyopya, binlerce yıllık zengin bir kültürel tarihe sahip olan ve çeşitli etnik grupların bir arada yaşadığı bir ülkedir. Bu çalışma, bu çeşitliliğin bir örneği olan ve özellikle eşsiz kültürel uygulamaları ve ekolojik zenginliği ile uluslararası alanda tanınan Aşağı Omo Vadisi'ndeki kırsal Hamar topluluğuna odaklanmaktadır. Hamar topluluğu, Güney Omo Bölgesi'nde yer alan çeşitli etnik gruplar arasında yer almakta olup, sığırların hem kültürel hem de ekonomik açıdan merkezi bir rol oynadığı tarımsal pastoralizmle yakından bağlantılı pastoral bir yaşam tarzını benzersiz bir şekilde somutlaştırmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Etiyopya'nın güneybatısındaki Aşağı Omo Vadisi'ndeki Hamar topluluğunun pastoral yaşam tarzı ve geleneksel uygulamalarının derinlemesine bir incelemesini sunmaktadır. Yapılan araştırmada Hamar topluluğunun yaşam tarzını belirleyen kültürel, ekonomik ve çevresel dinamikleri ve bu topluluğun benzersiz sosyo-ekonomik yapısı ve ekolojik uyumu incelenmiştir. Bu çalışma, bölgesel ve küresel düzeyde pastoralizmin sürdürülebilirliği ve kültürel çeşitliliğin korunması konularına katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Saha ve katılımcı gözlem tekniklerinin bir kombinasyonu ile yürütülen araştırma, Hamar topluluğunun geleneksel yaşam biçimlerini sürdürürken karşılaştıkları günlük faaliyetleri, kültürel uygulamaları ve zorlukları incelenmiştir. Gözlemci ve katılımcı gözlem tekniklerinin kullanılması, toplumun günlük

pratiklerini derinlemesine incelemeyi ve ileride fiziki antropoloji alanında gerçekleştirmeyi düşündüğüm beslenme alışkanlıklarının biyolojik yönden ele alınacağı araştırmanın ön çalışmasını da oluşturmaktadır. Bu araştırma sayesinde makale, Etiyopya'daki yerli kültürlerin korunmasına ilişkin daha geniş bir söyleme katkida bulunmakta ve gelişen dış etkilerin ortasında Hamar toplumunun zengin mirasını koruma ihtiyacını vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Agro-pastoralizm, kültürel koruma, Etiyopya, Hamar, geleneksel uygulamalar.

## **STRUCTURED ABSTRACT**

Ethiopia, situated in the Horn of Africa, boasts a rich cultural heritage and a history dating back millions of years. This country is considered a cradle of civilisations with a history spanning thousands of years and is therefore known as the "Land of Origins" (Unesco, 2024). Ethiopia's prehistoric past has been home to important discoveries that shed light on ancient human history. In particular, the three-million-year-old skeleton of *Australopithecus afarensis*, also known as 'Lucy' or 'Dinqinesh', found in 1974 in the Afar desert in eastern Ethiopia, (Johanson & Edey, 1981) has provided valuable clues to human history. However, Ethiopia's history of civilisation is not limited to the prehistoric periods. The country has been home to many civilisations since ancient times. For example, the Tigray region in the north of the country is known for Lalibela, an important Christian Ethiopian Orthodox church centre. Also, the city of Axum is known as the centre of the Kingdom of Aksum, one of Ethiopia's ancient kingdoms, and many historical monuments and artefacts are found here. The rich history and cultural heritage of Ethiopia has aroused interest and admiration throughout the world (Levine, 2004). The country is of great importance in terms of religious and cultural heritage, as well as important discoveries in human history (Stringer, 2003). Therefore, Ethiopia has been a destination point for many researchers, scientists and enthusiasts of the origins of civilisation.

The South Omo Zone, part of Ethiopia's Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), is home to diverse ethnic groups, each with unique languages and customs. South Omo Region is a region of pastoral local communities recognised for their traditional way of life based on agriculture and animal husbandry. These communities traditionally practise a combination of agriculture and animal husbandry called agro-pastoralism (Tegegne et al., 2013). Animals are not only of economic value to these communities; they also have a deep cultural significance. For example, cattle are considered a symbol of wealth, prestige and social status and play a central role in various ceremonies. However, these communities show resilience to cope with these challenges, relying on traditional knowledge from the past and seasonal migration patterns. In response to periods of drought, they engage in seasonal migrations to locate more productive grazing areas, thereby safeguarding and sustaining their livestock (Mekuriaw & Harris-Coble, 2021).

The Hamar, an important ethnic group in the South Omo region, maintain rich cultural practices such as coffee ceremonies, beekeeping, and animal husbandry. These traditional practices form the social and cultural fabric of the Hamar community. Specifically, coffee ceremonies play a crucial role in the social interactions and communal cohesion of the Hamar people. Coffee is seen not only as a beverage, but also as a means of hospitality and strengthening social bonds. Beekeeping also occupies an important place in Hamar culture. Traditional beehives are hung on trees and honey has been produced by local people for years. Honey is used for both dietary and commercial purposes and plays an important role in the economic and cultural life of the Hamar community.

Marriage customs also form part of the Hamar cultural identity. Marriage is often marked by the exchange of animals and reflects the importance the village places on wealth and social status. This custom forms the basis of the community's economic and social relations and strengthens the bonds between members of the group. In this context, marriage is seen not only as a union between two individuals, but also as a union between two families and even two local societies.

Other notable cultural markers that contribute to the unique identity of the Hamar people include the iron necklaces worn by women, the red oxide ornaments and the borkoto worn by men. These markers

reflect the Hamar's traditional style of dress and adornment and are considered part of their identity. The iron necklaces, in particular, are a symbolic expression of women's marital status and reflect social relations and status within the settlement.

Unfortunately, today the growth of tourism and modern influences are major challenges to the preservation of traditional ways of life. Tourist visits and external influences can affect and change the traditional practices of the community. Efforts should be made to preserve the traditional way of life and to maintain the cultural heritage of the group, but these efforts can be challenged by the impact of the modern world. Therefore, this ethnic group strives to balance traditional and modern elements and struggles to maintain its cultural identity. Pastoralist communities in the South Omo Region, therefore, not only survive despite environmental challenges, but also maintain their own cultural identity and traditions. This resilience enables these communities to sustain and pass on their valuable heritage to future generations. This is critical for the cultural diversity and sustainable development of the region and Ethiopia.

### **Introduction**

Ethiopia is located in the Horn of Africa, situated in the northeastern part of the continent of Africa. It is bordered by Eritrea to the north, Djibouti and Somalia to the east, Kenya to the south, South Sudan to the west, and Sudan to the northwest. The discovery of the three-million-year-old skeleton of *Australopithecus afarensis*, famously known as 'Lucy or Dinqinesh' found in the Afar desert of eastern Ethiopia in 1974 provides valuable insights into our early human ancestors. Recent findings at Aramis extend the recorded history of Ethiopia to 4.4 million years ago, although *A. afarensis* had previously been dated to between 3 and 3.6 million years ago (Johanson & Edey, 1981). Ethiopia held a special place in the beliefs of the ancient Greeks. According to Homer, the ancient gods would often travel to Ethiopia, located in the Horn of Africa, to enjoy the hospitality of a people renowned for their grace and virtue. The human population in Ethiopia is richly varied. In addition to major communities such as the Amhara in the central region, the Tigray people in the north, and the Oromo in the south and central regions, Ethiopia is home to numerous smaller ethnic groups, each with distinctive languages and customs (Munro-Hay, 2019). The South Omo Zone located in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) is Ethiopia's one of the nine administrative regions. It is home to 45 ethnic groups, each with their own unique language and culture. The pastoral region of the South Omo Zone is one of the most remote and sparsely populated areas in Ethiopia (Michael et al., 2005).

The Lower Omo Valley in southwestern Ethiopia is known for its distinctive cultural practices, livestock-range management, and ecological landscape. This UNESCO World Heritage Site is home to agricultural, pastoralist, and agro-pastoralist communities from Ethiopia's diverse and traditional ethnic groups. The South Omo Zone is renowned for its diverse indigenous communities, encompassing the Mursi, Nyangatom, Banna, Tsemay, Bodi, Arbore, Dassenech (also known as Dassanach), Nyangatom, Hamar, and Karo. These communities serve as an invaluable repository of traditional knowledge and practices, offering a unique insight into the continent's rich cultural tapestry. Clack and Brittain's (2018) comprehensive documentation of these groups is a testament to this rich heritage. It represents a normative condition where diverse groups consistently express and uphold their distinct identities, rather than just arriving and interacting. The Southern Omo region in southern Ethiopia covers an area of 23,535 square kilometers and encapsulates a unique cultural dynamic (Gebeyehu and Abbink, 2022). The communities in the South Omo Zone have a traditional lifestyle that revolves around agro-pastoralism, where agriculture and animal husbandry are intertwined. Cattle, in particular, hold significant cultural and economic value, symbolizing wealth and playing a central role in various ceremonies and rites of passage (Kusse et al., 2022). The South Omo Zone has one of the highest cattle densities per 1000 inhabitants in the country, according to Whyte (1979). These groups are more closely related to pastoralist cultures than agricultural cultures. For many ethnic communities, cattle represent a symbol of prestige, affluence, and sustenance, and are intricately connected to their cultural identity, as noted by Gebeyehu and Abbink (2022). Animal husbandry and agro-pastoralists face numerous challenges due to their reliance on critical resources such as land, water, forests, wildlife, livestock, and pasture. This is especially true during prolonged drought

and low rainfall, which can lead to scarcity of resources and dried-out grazing areas. The well-being of animals is at risk in such situations, as vegetation fades away and pastoralists are left with diminished resources to sustain their herds.

The southwestern region of Ethiopia is home to a diverse range of cultures, each with their own unique practices. These cultural expressions are often showcased through intricate body adornments, unique hairstyles, and colourful attire. Rituals and ceremonies play an important role in their lives, marking important milestones such as initiation into adulthood, marriage and seasonal festivals. Over the past thirty years, the Hamar's traditional way of life has changed rapidly. Tourist interest in the local markets set up on certain days in the towns of Dimeka and Turmi has begun to affect the traditional practices of the people. Anthropologists Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker's extensive studies and documentaries on Hamar in the 1970s and beyond have been invaluable resources (see Lydall & Strecker, 1979a, 1979b; Strecker & Berinas, 2013; Lydall, 2000a, 2000b). Tourist visits have had a significant impact on the Lower Omo communities, particularly on the local communities residing in the Omo Valley. Lydall asserts that the Hamar people are among the most prominent tourist groups in the region, with a significant presence in the tourism sector and a reputation as a popular tourist destination. (Lydall, 2000b). This has resulted in a series of social, cultural, and material changes that have altered their traditional lifestyles. The introduction of new dynamics by these visitors has intervened in the traditional norms and habits of local communities, bringing about a transformation in their way of life.

South Omo region is one of the arid and semi-arid regions in Ethiopia. Irregular and low rainfall causes severe water scarcity for livestock. Pastoralists and agro-pastoralists therefore need to travel long distances to find water sources (Adicha and Mada, 2020). The Hamar are deeply rooted in pastoral and agro-pastoral traditions, relying mainly on livestock for their livelihood. Their lifestyle centers around the practice of herding livestock, which entails seasonal movements to find suitable grazing pastures (Tefera, 2013). A Pastoral Development Office (PDO) survey conducted in 2005 revealed that 35% of the Hamar people were engaged in agro-pastoral activities, while the remaining 65% were predominantly pastoral. Pastoralism is not just an occupation for the Hamar; it is a way of life imbued with rich cultural practices and profound ecological knowledge. Their intimate connection with the land and their animals is evident in their seasonal migration patterns, where entire communities embark on arduous journeys to follow the natural rhythms of the environment (Figure 1). During the dry season, when resources become scarce in their home territories, the Hamar demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability by migrating to areas with abundant grass and water. This ensures the well-being of their livestock and, consequently, their own survival. Furthermore, the intricate social organisation of the Hamar is of the utmost importance in sustaining their pastoral lifestyle.

The lifestyles of traditional pastoral societies and the key elements of these livelihoods have long been of interest to anthropologists and researchers alike. This study addresses the following research question: 'What are the key elements and characteristics of the pastoral lifestyle of the Hamar in the Lower Omo Valley, southwest Ethiopia?' It examines traditional practices, economic activities, and social structures of the Hamar, with the aim of understanding the pastoral lifestyle of the Hamar and its role and importance within the community.

### **Definition of the study area and data collection techniques**

The South Omo Zone is located in the southwestern region of the country and is home to sixteen distinct ethnic groups, each with unique cultures and livestock-range management practices (Worku and Lisanework, 2016). The study was conducted in the Hamar Woreda, which is located in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPRS) and is home to one of the ethnic groups in the South Omo Zone. According to the 2007 census data, 83.9% of Ethiopia's population lived in rural areas (Central Statistical Agency Ethiopia, 2012). Hamar Woreda, where the study was conducted, covers an area of 5,6978 square kilometers and includes 24 k'ebeles. K'ebele is a local administrative division, similar in size to a sizable village (Szava, 2015). The Hamar are a pastoralist group. They herd cattle, goats and sheep

in the south-western region of Ethiopia (Courtright et al.,1993). “They speak an Omotic language”(Petrollino, 2022, 4). They are the predominant ethnic group in the pastoral regions of the zone (Courtright et al., 1993; Yitbarek, 2020) with an estimated total population of 56,359 according to demographic data from the Central Statistic Agency (CSA) of Ethiopia in 2007 (Bekele et al., 2019). They are known for their warm hospitality and vibrant cultural traditions, (Dessiye, 2012) much like other communities in the South Omo Zone, and move seasonally with their herds to find grazing areas and water for their animals. This forms their shared identity.

The field research was initiated between August-September 2022. Qualitative research method was used in this study and the data obtained are based on participant observation and observation techniques. The observed population consisted of 38 households and about 300 individuals. The research on the daily life of the rural community of Hamar used both field and participant observation techniques to collect data. Observation is a technique used in the social sciences to systematically describe events, behaviours and artefacts within a social setting. It is used to collect data about people, processes, and cultures, and is also regularly used by researchers in community settings to record human behaviour (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Kawulich, 2005). Observations are a crucial tool for researchers to depict current conditions using the five senses. They create a textual snapshot of the subject under investigation and serve as the principal techniques employed by anthropologists during fieldwork (Erlandson, 1993; De Munck, 1998). Kawulich (2005) recommends overt observation as the preferred technique, where participants are fully aware that they are being observed for research purposes. The aim of this approach is to uncover the rich tapestry of the Hamar's cultural heritage and its impact on their daily lives. Various aspects of daily activities, cultural rituals, customs, routines and interactions were recorded through field observation. Participant observation, a technique that has been used for decades (Whyte,1979; Hames and Michael,2014), provided first-hand information about the perspectives, traditions, and experiences of members of the population. Observations of daily activities provide deep insights into communal traditions, rituals, socio-economic activities, and dietary habits. These observations have contributed to my understanding of the overall dynamics of society through people's lifestyles, cultural values, and daily habits. I gathered some information with the help of a language assistant who speaks Amharic, English, and Hamar while making observations. The Hamar people's hospitality and openness significantly enriched my research experience. They welcomed me into their homes and daily activities, allowing me to observe and participate in their cultural practices. This welcoming environment was essential for the depth and quality of my observations.



**Map 1.** Map of the South Omo Zone located in southwestern Ethiopia, including the Hamar Woreda that is the focus of my article, as well as nearby towns in the region.





**Figure 1:** Hut in the village of Hamar

### **1.Social structure and gender roles in the Hamars**

My observations indicate that the Hamar people are facing a number of challenges in Ethiopia. Their culture is often shaped by the accessible resources in a specific region, which can have a profound impact on geographic location and food consumption. Women perform a variety of essential tasks, including waking up early, preparing meals, caring for children, collecting firewood and water, grinding grain, milking, cleaning the house, and participating in agricultural work. Children between the ages of 8 and 10 are also responsible for carrying water as part of their household chores. According to their age, each child carries water containers of varying sizes on their backs and fetches water every other day. They also learn to grind from their mothers and take care of their brothers and sisters when their mothers are away at the market or field.

Following the morning buna ceremony, with the first light of dawn the Hamar men embarks on the task of herding their animals towards the expansive pasture areas. As the sun ascends, the Hamar men, each with their hands with the borkoto, set out on this daily journey. Borkoto is a traditional household item made from wood, used as both a pillow and a stool. Hamar men carry it with them to use when they need a bit of rest in the fields. The borkoto carried by Hamar men, who establish a deep connection with their surroundings, reflects not only a practical tool they use when they want to rest but also a cultural emblem embodying the heritage and responsibilities passed down through generations. As the sun set, I also witnessed the Hamar men returning to the village with their animals. This daily ritual not only sustains the community's livelihood, but also reinforces the cultural significance of the borkoto as an integral part of the Hamar men's identity and their harmonious coexistence with the land.

Beekeeping is a long-standing tradition in various regions of Ethiopia, where traditional beehives are suspended from trees. In this village, beekeeping is among the daily tasks carried out by men, forming a significant part of their societal roles. Men make traditional beehives that are hung on trees (Figure 2). The honey, which is regularly consumed in homes, is produced through a process that begins with selecting the finest wood, usually sourced from resilient trees that withstand the elements. The selected pieces are crafted into beehive structures, carefully designed to house and protect the precious honey-making inhabitants. What distinguishes this practice is the coating of the exteriors of the hives with a covering derived from animal feces. The resulting beehives provide shelter for the bees and exemplify the beauty of traditional

In this village, theft is non-existent, even in the beekeeping area where traditional beehives are hung on trees. According to local residents, there is an unwavering trust in each other, which is highlighted by the preservation of the security of personal belongings, including beehives. This demonstrates an extraordinary level of honesty and mutual respect within the community. For the Hamar people, beekeeping is an important activity that contributes to the subsistence economy of the Hamar society and is part of the men's roles in the social structure.



**Figure 2:** Beehive construction

## 2. The food culture and ritual practices of the Hamar people

Sorghum, also known as *Sorghum bicolor* (L.), is the world's fifth most important cereal crop, following maize, rice, wheat, and barley (Jaćimović et al., 2024). It holds a significant position as one of the most produced and consumed crops in Ethiopia (Strecker, 1976; Yali & Begna, 2022). Sorghum is at the heart of the Hamar's agro-pastoral diet and is cultivated mainly by the women of the village. Sorghum is the Hamar's main source of livelihood. It is cultivated by women and used to prepare various foods. After harvesting, it is ground into flour using grinding stones and skilfully transformed into a variety of delectable dishes. Sorghum has a higher protein content than corn, but a lower amount of digestible protein (Kaplan & Kızılsimşek, 2012).

Another way to prepare a main meal is by making a dish called 'muna.' This involves creating sausage-like rolls from ground wheat and boiling them in a gourd (Figure 3). The responsibility of making muna falls on adult women, as it requires precision in balancing the mixture of water and flour to prevent the rolls from disintegrating during cooking. This extensive and laborious task is performed by Hamar women and girls.



**Figure 3:** Traditional pastoralist living: a 'muna' dish

Due to the region's low annual rainfall and limited land for gardening based on family size, moringa is grown as a vegetable, while thorn is cultivated as a fruit in the fields. The moringa tree has the potential to play a significant role in addressing climate change and increasing the incomes of impoverished farmers in Africa (Gedefaw, 2015). Moringa (*Moringa oleifera*) is a plant that produces edible leaves and is cultivated in fields. It is undemanding in terms of care and water requirements. The leaves are collected for both household use and year-round market sales (Figure 4).

Maize is the primary source of daily nutrition in the villages. The main meals of the day revolve around dishes made from carbohydrate-containing cereals, such as wheat and maize. Maize, in various forms, makes up a significant portion of the food in every household. To prepare it, a small quantity of oil and salt is added to water that is brought to a boil, and then mixed to form a crumbly dough that is usually eaten with fingers. Porridge is one of the most consumed and cooked foods in the village. Maize flour is the main ingredient in the porridge, which is a staple food for all the ethnic groups, especially during the rainy season when there is an abundance of grass and water.

## 2. 1. Cultural practices, rituals and ceremonies

From my fieldwork, it is evident that the Hamar have a plethora of cultural practices, rituals, and ceremonies that shape their distinctive way of life. They celebrate and express their identity through a variety of customs that encompass daily life, significant events, and rites of passage. Among their daily rituals, coffee ceremonies hold a special place. The buna, a local beverage made from coffee beans, is carefully prepared in the early hours of the morning. When coffee is brewed at home outside of regular meal times, neighbours may be invited to share in this delightful moment. The coffee ceremony is also a symbol of hospitality. Brewed in large earthenware pots, the buna is served to everyone in the house. In Hamar, the coffee ceremony is not just a daily routine; it is a collective celebration that strengthens bonds through a shared love for this beloved beverage.

Parsi is a beloved beverage among the Hamar people in the South Omo Zone, and it holds a special place in their celebrations. It is a symbol of the rich cultural fabric woven into the daily life and ceremonies of the village. Parsi is made from grains such as sorghum, maize, or wheat, and it plays a delicious and symbolic role in Hamar traditions. While some households may choose to add alcohol to their Parsi, others prefer the natural sweetness of honey to personalize this beverage. 'Parsi' also consumed as food, as seen in the image figure 5. It is a highly esteemed drink that is often served during cultural events or rites of passage. It embodies the stories, traditions, and rituals passed down through generations, making it a



valuable and enduring symbol of Hamar cultural identity.



Figure 4: The Moringa plant



Figure 5: Preparation of 'parisi' also consumed as food

### 3. The family structure and marriage types of the Hamars

The Hamar household is polygamous. It is patriarchal and patrilocal. (Tefera, 2013, p.122). The Hamar have a varied system for getting married. It depends on the household. Divorce is not common in this society. Men can marry more than two women as long as they can afford the bride price. The female offsprings from these marriages serve as an indicator of the family's future wealth. Marriage practices, whether monogamous or polygamous, vary among Hamar households. A man is able to father children with any of his wives. The change in marriage customs in this community was a striking example. Young girls are often married off in exchange for cattle, commonly called dowry. Despite the age difference between brides and grooms in some marriages, they are usually married to their husbands in exchange for sheep, goats and cattle. In such cases, the groom may be expected to pay the bride price himself if he is financially able to do so. Nevertheless, they may request assistance from other members of the community if they lack the necessary resources.

The existence of this support system is contingent upon the high value placed on lineage and the perpetuation of the family name. In the event of the first wife experiencing fertility issues or only giving birth to female offsprings, a man may elect to enter into a second marriage with the objective of ensuring the continuity of the lineage. In some cultures, a man may choose to pursue a second marriage if he has attained sufficient wealth and is dissatisfied with the attitudes or work ethics of his children from his first marriage. This decision should not be based on subjective evaluations and should be clearly marked as a cultural practice. The responsibilities of children in contributing to the household and preserving traditions play a significant role in family dynamics in the Hamar culture.

#### 3.1. Bride wealth

Animals are the bedrock of wealth within pastoral societies. It is a common misconception that herds of cattle, sheep and goats are merely possessions; in fact, they are living embodiments of wealth. Cattle are not merely objects of ownership; they serve a pivotal function in the formation of social identity within

pastoral societies, such as the Hamar. It occupies an important place in important rituals such as birth, death and marriage (Petrollino, 2022). The size of a family's livestock holdings often determines its social standing and economic stability. In this context, the exchange of animals holds profound cultural weight, such as in the bride price, where the transfer of livestock serves as a symbolic gesture representing the union of two families. In accordance with traditional practices observed among the Hamar people, distribution of cattle, sheep, and goats to the bride's family among the Hamar people is contingent upon the economic capacity of the groom's household. In instances where the groom's family encounters financial limitations, it is common practice to seek assistance from extended relatives to fulfill the customary bride wealth obligations. Disputes and transgressions too are often resolved through livestock exchanges or compensations. From rites of passage to communal celebrations, livestock are sacrificial offerings that bridge the earthly and spiritual realms.

According to the Hamar perspective, wealth is determined by the number of livestock owned by a man. This differs from the modern, centralized paper currency system in that the Hamar's purchasing power is based on tangible, living animals that they care for.

In recent years, however, the Hamar people have faced significant challenges. They report that poor rains have dried up water sources and depleted grazing land, leading to the deaths of livestock in large numbers. This has resulted in reduced livelihoods, food insecurity, and profound cultural and social losses for the people of this village, especially with the loss of their cattle, which represent not only an economic investment but also a crucial part of their social fabric.

### 3.2. Cultural practices related to the social status of women in marriage

During my fieldwork, I observed the significant cultural practices and symbolism associated with the iron necklaces worn by Hamar women. In a unique cultural twist, the number of iron necklaces a woman wears can reveal her marital status. Traditionally, the number and style of these necklaces convey meaningful information about a woman's marital status. In the traditional context, if a Hamar woman wears three iron necklaces, it signifies her position as the first wife in a marriage. Conversely, the presence of two iron rings indicates that she held the role of a second wife. The third iron ring, distinguished by a hook, served as a symbolic marker identifying her as a man's first wife. The wearing of iron rings was once deeply rooted in cultural customs, but it has now transitioned into a predominantly decorative aspect of Hamar women's attire. In recent years, iron rings have become popular as decorative accessories, moving away from their original function as indicators of marital status. Additionally, women wear beaded necklaces on their arms and necks. They soften animal hides and sew their traditional clothing, embellishing them with sea shells and various beads.

The tradition of colouring the hair of Hamar women with red ochre is an important part of the deep-rooted cultural heritage of their society. This tradition takes a special place in the lives of women and helps them to express their identity, cultural belonging and social status. The red ochre is acquired from the local market and is sprinkled onto their hair. Then, a blend of butter and water is applied to the hair. This creates a striking visual expression with cultural significance (Figure 6). Additionally, the mixture applied to the body serves as a natural shield, providing a protective layer against the effects of the sun. This practice also keeps flies at bay, ensuring comfort in the daily lives of the women. In the Hamar village, red clay painting holds a profound cultural significance, particularly as a rite of passage for young girls before embarking on the journey of marriage. Before getting married, young girls have their bodies and hair painted with red clay, which remains on their skin for approximately three months. The Hamar women's tradition of hair colouring is not only about personal care and beauty, but also expresses an important cultural symbolism for their whole. It is a significant ritual that has been passed down from generation to generation and has become part of their society's identity.



**Figure 6:** Hamar women are exhibiting the cultural practice of colouring their hair with a mixture of red ochre

## Conclusion

Ethiopia is known as the 'Land of Origins' due to being a cradle of civilisation with a history that extends for thousands of years. The Ethiopian Woreda has a long-standing reputation for hospitality, a tradition that endures to this day. This is a testament to their rich cultural heritage. Similarly, the Hamar people believe that true prosperity lies not in material possessions such as cars, salaries, or houses, but in the natural treasures bestowed by their ancestral lands. Material possessions may come and go, but the enduring prosperity of Hamar land lies in the intrinsic connection between its people and the natural treasures that grace their lives.

This study, conducted through participant observation, contributes to our understanding of the intricate interplay among culture, environment, and human behavior. By documenting the lifestyle and cultural practices of the Hamar ethnic group, this research underscores the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge and fostering mutual respect amidst a rapidly changing world. These insights enhance our understanding of social evolution, emphasizing the need for cultural preservation and sustainable development strategies.

Reflecting on my experiences, observing the Hamar people was a particularly positive experience due to their hospitable and helpful nature. During my fieldwork as an anthropologist, I noticed that the Hamar people did not seem to attach much importance to race or ethnicity. They welcomed me and other anthropologists from different ethnic backgrounds with open arms and expressed considerable delight upon our return after an extended absence. This openness and warmth greatly enhanced my understanding of their culture and society. My observation of the daily life of the Hamar people in the Omo valley has deepened my understanding that cultural exchange and mutual respect are the foundation for fostering harmonious relationships. In the embrace of the Hamar, the significance of shared humanity is such that it transcends any distinctions, thereby reinforcing the idea that our common experiences and shared values serve to bridge cultural divides. The Hamar people's way of life is defined by their harmonious coexistence with nature. They have a deep respect for the land, their animals, and each other. The Hamar people have a resilient livelihood, forged through their age-old traditions and adaptive strategies. They continue to

thrive amidst the challenges of modernity and environmental change.

Despite my extensive reflection on the subject, it is evident from direct observation and engagement with the Hamar community that a substantial transformation is imminent. In the coming years, tourist visits to the Lower Omo will bring significant social, cultural and material changes to the traditional lifestyles of local communities in the Omo Valley. While the Hamar living in rural areas remain relatively isolated from these influences, villages closer to towns and cities are beginning to feel the impact of tourism. This evolving dynamic highlights the delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to external influences. It is crucial to monitor these changes closely to understand their long-term impact on the cultural fabric and socio-economic structure of the Hamar community.

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