



# Tourism potential and constraints: considering the natural and cultural attractions of South Omo, Ethiopia

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## Abstract

South Omo had been major tourist destination in Ethiopia due its diverse cultural resources. The main objective of this research was to unlock tourism potential, constraints and natural attributes of South Omo Zone. Nine communities from sixteen ethnic communities that live in the zone were first purposely selected and then data was gathered from different target groups using observation, key informant in depth interview and a self-administered questionnaire survey. Out of the nine ethnic communities, the findings showed that Hamar, Mursi, Dassenech and Karo were the most visited and thus top ranked tribes to visit according to tourists. Analysis from tour operators' itineraries show similar findings with that of the respondent tourists'. The major constraints hindering tourism include inter-alia, the absence of safety and security in some areas in the zone. Begging was observed in all ethnic communities and the majority of tourists suggested its absence from the area they visited. Lack of road infrastructure was another major constraint especially in two ethnic communities; Erborie and Nyangatom. Improving road infrastructural quality and avoiding security problems in the zone should be undertaken so as to further promote tourism development and an increased tourist length of stay in the zone which would be an economically important aspect.

**Keywords:** cultural tourism, potential, constraints, South Omo,

## Introduction and Justification

Tourism is a fast-growing global industry, contributing huge economic benefits to the worldwide community (Theobald, 2005; Vanhove, 2005). Tourism attractions, sites and destinations have been drawing visitors from different countries for centuries. According to the UNWTO (2015), there is a growing number of tourism destinations throughout the world which have created opportunity for investment in tourism, changing it into a key driver of socio-economic progress through the creation of jobs and enterprises, export revenues, and infrastructural development.



Tourism has been used as a tool for socio-economic development (Christie, et al., 2013) as well as national development (World Economic Forum, 2015). It is considered as a tool for poverty alleviation in areas where there is drought and mainly within the rural areas of developing countries (Maza, 2016; The World Bank, 2009).

Considering its potential, many nations are giving due attention to the development of tourism in their respective countries and regions. As a result of this initiative, new tourism destinations are being created and the already existing destinations are simultaneously modifying offerings to satisfy the dynamic demands of tourists. Africa has a huge tourism potential but its international tourism market shares by arrival and by receipt was not more than five and three percent in the years 2013 and 2014 respectively (UNWTO, January, 2015; April, 2015). Kareem, (2013) found that tourism has a direct relation to African economic growth. According to his findings, for every tourist arrival there will be 10% and 4% increase in the level of economic growth for the difference and orthogonal deviations, respectively. Consequently, he recommends that African countries focus on tourism development so as to improve their economic development (Kareem, 2013). Ayeni, (2013) found that tourism could diversify the Nigerian economy from being a mainly oil-based economy if given a tourism focus. Tourism plays the following critical roles in an economy: it creates opportunities for various developments, triggers infrastructural development and generates revenue (Ayeni, 2013).

Although Ethiopia is well known for its historical tourism attractions and resources, and has been visited by millions of foreigners, the industry of the country is still not at the level where it deserves to be (Feseha, 2011). The World Bank (2008) reported that Ethiopia's competitiveness in terms of tourism resources especially cultural tourism, is better when compared to our neighbours. But when the comparison is made in terms of tourism product development (accessibility), the World Economic Forum (2015) report suggested that the country needs to improve a lot. According to EBC (July 14, 2016), the Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn, while on an annual and official launch-day for the new tourism brand of the country said: "*we achieved 97% of our plan. However, it is good result; it is not enough when we compare with our neighbors.*" He added "*we must work hard to attract more than 5 million tourists by the coming year*".

Exploring tourism potential and product in the country diversifies tourism products, provides diverse experience for tourists, offers an opportunity for tourism developers and further develops the tourism industry holistically. South Omo is one of the culturally rich areas with sixteen ethnic groups and is the most preferred zone by tourists in southern Ethiopia. Tourism in the zone is mainly culture-based, more specifically ethnic-based. Of the sixteen ethnic groups only few are being visited by tourists even though they all have huge potential. The tourism resources found in this zone can be the main components of a so-called ethnic tourism. According to King (1994) the exotic culture of indigenous people and their lifestyle are the main element of attractions for ethnic tourists.

Though all ethnic groups found in the zone have huge potential for tourism development, only few are being visited and consumed by tourism due to various reasons such as: a lack of infrastructural development, lack of attention given to the resources, the distance from the main town where there is accommodation sector and so on. According to Lydall (1994) and Turton (2004), Hamar and Mursi are the most visited tourism communities in the zone. This could be due to the fact that they are more popular by their unique culture which has been marketed by



tour operators. Recently tourism has been receiving attention from various interest groups; government, non-governmental organizations and private investors for different reasons. Nevertheless, the tourism potential of the zone hasn't been revealed to the world by undertaking scientific investigation. To date research has been focusing on the anthropological, archaeological and such impact aspects of tribes of the zone (Shea, 2008; Agumas, 2010; Desta, 1993, 1995, 1997; Laydall & Strecker, 1979; Srecker, 1970; Strecker, 2013). The current researchers assumed that if tourism potential, constraints and nature of the South Omo are scientifically explored and investigated, then the tourism resources will be promoted and used for tour and travel companies to include in their packages. Then it is important that all constraints be addressed by the concerned body and the tourism of the zone will then be easy to manage. Besides this, the finding of this research could be considered by policy and decision makers. Tourism could be used as second livelihood alternative for many of the inhabitants of the zone if ethnic tourism is well developed in their areas. Hence the current researchers found it worthy to assess and identify tourism potential and the development levels of the zone. Specifically, this research aimed to answer the following questions:

- What are the tourism resources and attractions of South Omo zone?
- Which tourism resources/ethnic communities are preferred by tourists?
- What are the major criteria used to rank communities?
- What are the major issues constraining tourism development in the zone?

### **Theoretical framework**

There are so many different definitions of tourism but we prefer to use the following definition for this research. "Tourism is defined as temporary movement of people from their usual environment to unusual environment for at least an overnight with the purpose of leisure, business and visiting friends and relatives" (cited in Theobald, 2005; Vanhove, 2005). Tourism as many researchers have suggested can be categorized in to different types, based on various criteria. For instance, classifying tourism based on the attraction as cultural, natural and mixed form of tourism. Others classify it based on tourist motivation such as leisure, visiting family and friends, sport, wildlife and adventure tourism. Ethnic tourism is a travel conducted by people seeking authentic, unspoiled, and exotic culture of the "natives," as well as an escape from the alienation of modern industrial society (cited in Pitchford, 1995:48).

People are motivated to engage themselves in tourism either by 'push or pull' factors (Kassean and Gassita, 2013). Push factors are internal whereas pull factors are external. The external factors are factors related to destination attributes (Ndlovu, 2015). In other words, people are attracted to places that have unique feature and appeal. In this regard, areas that have more appeal or unique feature in terms of resources, accommodation and other tourism related facilities is more attracted than areas which is not. An area's attractiveness reflects the feelings and opinions of its visitors about the tourism destination's perceived ability to satisfy tourist needs. "*The more a destination is able to meet the needs of the tourists, the more it is perceived to be attractive and the more the destination is likely to be chosen*" (Vengesayi, 1-3 December, 2003).

According to Medlik (2003), a tourism attraction is component of tourism product that attracts visitors and make them decide on which attraction to visit. According to him there are different types of attractions such as: *site* attractions (e.g., climatic, scenic, historical), and *event*



attractions (e.g., **festivals**, sporting events, trade **fairs**); *natural and man-made or built attractions* (Medlik, 2003: 168). As we can see from the following definition attraction is a component of tourism product which is nothing independent of other components of tourism product.

In a narrow sense, what tourists buy, e.g., transport or accommodation, separately or as a package. In a wider sense, an amalgam of what the tourist does and of the attractions, facilities and services he/she uses to make it possible. From the tourist's point of view, the total product covers the complete experience from leaving home to return. As distinct from an airline seat or a hotel room as individual products, the total tourist product: be it a beach holiday (vacation), a sightseeing tour or a conference trip is a composite product (Medlik, 2003: 169).

Christie, et al., (2013) and França, (2008) noted that tourism development can exist and be successful when there is participation of various stakeholders such as 1) government sectors in developing and implementing tourism policy and regulations and infrastructures, 2) private sectors in investing in accommodation, attractions, and tourism services and facilities, and its knowledge transfer, 3) local communities in being hospitable and get benefit of it and 4) donors/NGOs in technical assistance to support the development and help raise it from one development level to another.

On the contrary the absence of the forementioned stakeholders could hamper the development of tourism in any region or zone. Andargie (2014) found that security problems, lack of facilities development, lack of well-trained ethical guides and financial limitations are constraints and challenges for tourism development in the islands of Lake Tana monasteries. Gedecho (2014), found similar issues at Gishen Debre Kerbie Mariam pilgrimage sites, including a lack of facilities, poor road infrastructure and a lack of promotion and other challenges related to religious tourism development. Ndivo, et al., (2012), noted that a destination appeals due to two basic factors: attractors and detractors. Attractors as cited in Ndivo, et al., (2012) are natural and cultural features, facilities and infrastructure, attitude of local people towards the tourists, economic level of the destinations, and climate. On the other hand detractors are issues that affect tourism competitiveness. These are safety and security, waste treatment, health and medicine, rules and regulations and others.

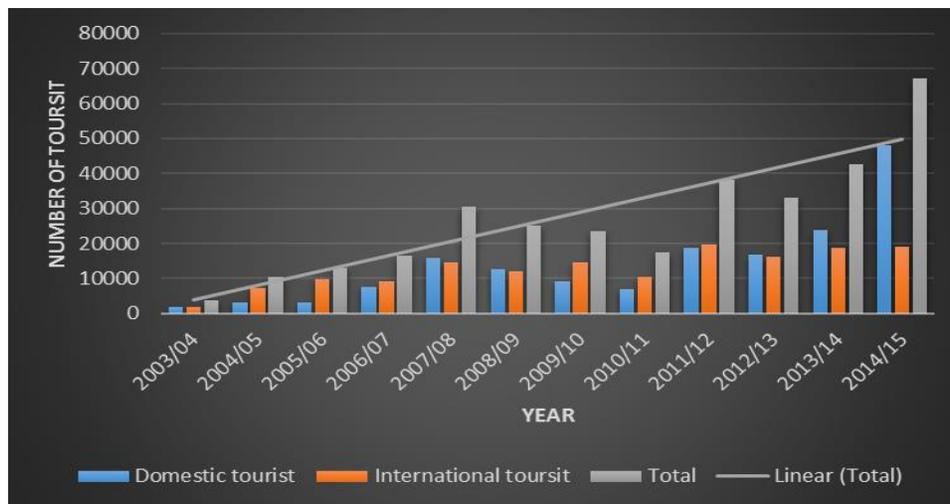
### **Tourism in South Omo zone**

South Omo zone is known for its cultural tourism resources. Though the tourist flow trend didn't grow linearly as desired, it shows a 16.7% average annual growth for the last 11 years. Large number of tourist visited the zone in the years 2007/08, 2011/12 and 2014/15 (see fig. 1). Domestic tourist flow to the zone had never been beyond international tourists flow before 2011/12, however, perhaps due to two basic reasons as suggested by informant "1. *It was only foreign visitors who considered tourists before 2011 and 2. Domestic tourist increased due to mega projects under taking on the region; Kuraz sugar factories project and road construction that have mobilized huge number of people from different parts of the country*" have been larger than international since 2011/12. Domestic tourists were visiting south Omo zone primarily for business purposes. According to informants from the Culture and Tourism Departments and hotels working in Jinka town, Ethiopians visit and stay at Jinka for meetings, training initiatives,

and also while on their way to the *Kuraz* sugar factory. Ethiopians were less active in visiting cultural resources of the zone ethnic communities (interview, May 2015).

In terms of road infrastructure, the zone was connected to its neighbor Konso via an asphalt road, while to other Weredas and zones it is connected by gravel roads. Weredas in the zone are semi connected to each other through gravel roads. More importantly, they are connected to their capital town Jinka with different types of road. Nevertheless, some of the roads are inaccessible during summer time. The only asphalt roads in the zone includes: Weito desert-Keyafer-Jinka and Turmi-Dassenech which cover nearly 200km.

In the zone there are three towns which are considered to be important for tourism: Turmi, Keyafer and Jinka. Turmi is a small town with total population less than 5,000 (interview with Kebele administrator, April, 2014) established for tourists in which there are more than twenty tourist standard hospitality sector establishments. It is in this small town where most tourists and tour operators preferred to stay long overnight while embarking on their visits to the four ethnic communities namely: Hamer, Karo, Dassenech, Erborie and Nyangatom. There are gravel roads that take tourist to these communities from this town. Besides this, the town is very close to different villages of the Hamer community and their cultural show areas. The small town is located about 110 km from the zonal town Jinka. Keyafer is a political center for Bena-Tsemay wereda and is well known for its Thursday open-market. The town is situated on the road Konso-weito-keyafer-Jinka, 35 km from Jinka. This makes the town preferred for at least overnight stays on the way to Jinka or Turmi. The third most important town whereby tourists can obtain different services such as internet, public services, and other services is Jinka, capital city of the zone. The capital city is home to nearly 50, 000 (FDRE-Central Statistical Agency, August 2013).



**Figure 1:** Tourist flow trend of South Omo Zone (Source: South Omo Culture and Tourism Department, 2016)

### Site Description

South Omo Zone is located at 755 km and 525 km from Addis Ababa and Hawassa respectively. It is the richest zone in terms of having ethnic diversity with a total of 16 (see figure 2). In the zone there are eight Weredas and 1 city administration. It shares border with Kenya



and South Sudan which could be a potential for organizing trips across the region due to its distance from Kenya and South Sudan in the future. Peoples of the zone are also close to their neighbours such as Konso, Derashie, Bench Maji-Surma, Gofa, Basketo and Konta; and share various cultural practices and life. According to the FDRE-Central Statistical Agency (August 2013), population projections for the year 2016, more than 700,000 people were projected to be living in the zone. The Ari ethnic community is the dominant group in the zone with a total population of more than 300,000. The minorities whose languages are on the verge of extinction in the zone are Murle, Bacha and Brayle with total populations of 1600, 2400 and 896 respectively. These communities are now overshadowed by their neighbours, Murle by Nyangatom, and Bacha by Dime whose population number is nearly 500 (they use Dimies' language) and Brayle by Tsemay (only five people speak their language and thus it is considered to be on the verge of extinction). The vast majority of the population livelihood depends on livestock rearing and they are thus pastoralist and semi pastoralist in orientation with the exception of Ari. The altitudinal range in the zone stretches from 360-3300 m above sea level. More than 60% of the land is desert, 35% kola and the rest is Woina-dega.

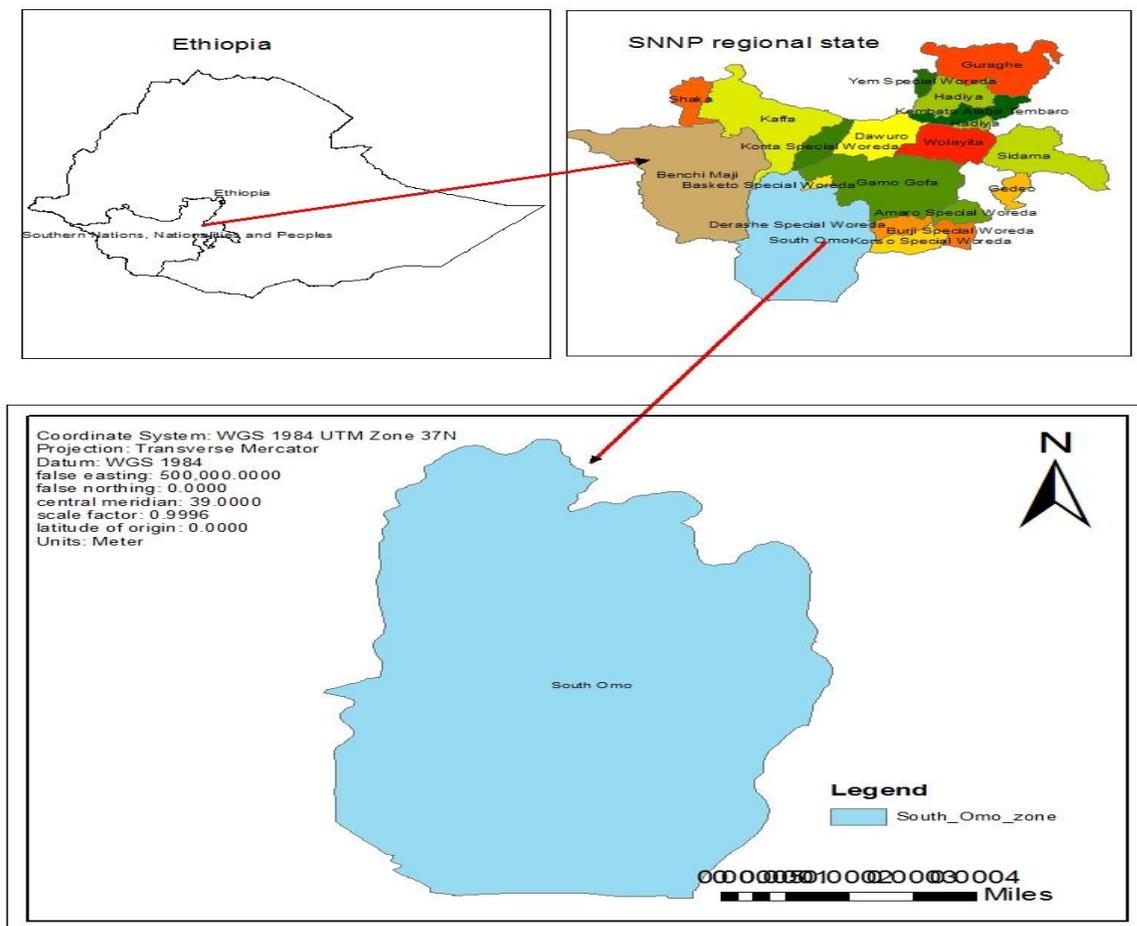


Figure 2: Location map of South Omo zone



## Research Design and Data Collection Methods

This research was qualitative in nature but tried to also use quantitative research methods so as to make the research more valid and reliable. Research methods such as field observation, informant in-depth interview and tourist questionnaire surveys as well as a review of secondary data were used to collect necessary data to achieve the objectives and answer the research questions posed.

For this research, the researchers selected nine of the sixteen ethnic communities purposely. The nine ethnic communities were selected based on their perceived potential for tourism development. These nine ethnic groups were from six *woredas*: Hamer (three ethnic communities: Hamer, Karo and Erborie), Nyangatom, Dassenech, Bena-Tsemay (two: Bena and Tsemay), Selamago (one: Mursi), and South Ari (one: Ari). These ethnic groups were selected because they have at least some developed and changed tourism resources in their region and they represent the vast majority of the tribes that are found in the zone. Nine ethnic communities were visited in order to identify tourism resources and attractions. Apart from this, observations were very important to find out if there were issues to be addressed and to evaluate tourism development status in the stated communities. Nearly 15 websites of tour operators based in Addis Ababa were visited in order to see and evaluate their package tours to south Omo (which ethnic communities are marketed and in fact sell to tourists). These 15 websites were chosen purposely based on their accessibility.

Key Informant In-depth Interviews were made with key informants who were from different government offices and different *woreda* culture and tourism offices. Interviews were also conducted with local guides and other local people. This instrument was vital in finding data related to what tourism resources were found in each of the communities and what activities were carried out by the concerned body for the development of tourism. For this purpose, a total of eight informants from five *woredas* were interviewed semi-structurally.

Self-administered tourist questionnaire surveys were used in order to gather data from tourists visiting different tribes of South Omo zone. Questions related to the profile of tourists, motivation, areas where tourists visit and their preferred sites/community and their opinions over the problems that affect tourism development in the zone were interrogated. The questionnaire was prepared in the English language and was distributed in two destinations where researchers believe tourists stay overnight and could have enough time to complete the questionnaire which was distributed in Turmi and Jinka.

Data collected through the questionnaire survey were first coded and then entered into SPSS software version 20 for analysis. Using this software, the frequency distribution, chi-square test and binomial analysis test were analyzed. Ranking was also made using this software. The results were then presented in tables. Data gathered through interviews and observations was analyzed using explanatory and narrative techniques. Qualitative data were supplemented with photos and figures.



## Findings

### Respondents Characteristics

Though the initial sample size was bigger, due to the lack of willingness of some tourists and available time as well as inconvenience, only 44 questionnaires were completed and collected at different hotels and lodges in Turmi and Jinka. As shown table 1 below, out of these 44 respondents 23 were male and 21 were female. This means we had proportional number of sex distribution in our sample. In terms of age, majority of the respondents were between the age of 30 and 39 (34%) and the second largest age group was between 50 and 59 (22%). This could tell us those young and older-aged tourists are interested in visiting south Omo's tribes. The vast majority constituting 89 percent were first time visitors and only 11 percent of the tourists were repeat visitors. This reveals that South Omo is not a preferred area for repeat visitors and this may be because the majority of visitors' experience negative issues in their first visit to South Omo. In terms of their origin, the majority of the respondents comprising 64% were from 9 European countries, 8 from USA, 3 from Japan, 1 from China, 1 from Australia, 1 Canada and 1 from Puerto-Rico. This is similar to findings by Walle (2010). By purpose, the vast majority consisting of 79.6 percent, were visiting South Omo for leisure and recreation purposes. This means South Omo tourism need to provide additional experiences that fulfil the leisure and recreation motivated visitors. Minimum length of stay was found to be 2 days whereas maximum length of stay was 12 days. Average length of stay at South Omo was 4.78 days with standard deviation of 2.2.

**Table 1:** Respondents' characteristics

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percent
Sex	Male	23	52.3
	Female	21	47.7
Age	between 18 and 29	8	18.2
	between 30 and 39	15	34.1
	between 40 and 49	5	11.4
	between 50 and 59	10	22.7
	Above 59	6	13.6
Purpose	Leisure and recreation	35	<b>79.6</b>
	Research/education	6	13.6
	Other	3	6.8
How do you know about South Omo?	Social media	15	24.6
	friends/relatives	18	29.5
	tour company	24	<b>39.3</b>
	Printed media	4	6.6
	Total	61	100.0
Mode of travel	Alone	13	29.5
	With family	15	34.1
	With 3-6	7	15.9
	In group (above 6)	9	20.5

\*Significant when  $p > .05$

... Source: Authors Survey, 2015/2016



## **Tourism Resources/Attractions**

The presence of tourism resources is one of the basic elements needed for a site to be tourism destination and competitive enough (cited in Enright & Newton, 2004; Vanhove, 2005)). As discussed earlier, resources are primary factors for the development and existence of other elements of the tourism product. In this regard, the findings show that south Omo zone is rich in both natural and cultural resources endowments. In south Omo there are different types of tourist resources and attractions. These tourism attractions are described and explained below.

### **Natural resources/attractions**

Wildlife conservation and sport hunting areas:

In south Omo there are three different types of conservation areas: National Parks, control hunting areas and wildlife reserves. According to the Development Conservation and Utilization of Wildlife Proclamation Act No. 541/2007, a National Park is type of protected area primarily designated for conservation, educational and recreation reasons where settlement, agricultural practice and livestock rearing is totally prohibited, whereas control hunting areas are areas designated for the conservation of wildlife. Legal hunting is permitted for sport hunters. Based on this classification we found Tama reserve, Murle control hunting area and Mago National Park to be among the well-known areas being visited by wildlife enthusiasts in the south Omo.

According to an informant, Murle control hunting area is the most prolific sport hunting area for sport hunters in the zone. It was designated in 1973 and has an area of 4172 km<sup>2</sup> (EWCA, 2016). It is one of the largest controlled hunting areas in Ethiopia. It is near to Mago National Park and Hamer Woreda. The control hunting area is accessible in two directions either via Mago National Park or via Karo community.

Mago National Park on the other hand, is one of the major Ethiopian National Parks which have been visited by many tourists. It was first established in 1972. It has it is known for the following wild mammals: lesser kudu, elephant and buffalo. It is accessible for viewing different wild animals and plants. The park comprises different ethnic communities in it and its surrounding areas which enable the park to thus be rich in both cultural and natural tourism resources. The park is a neighbor to Hamer, Dassenech, Salamago, Gnyangatom, Ari and Bena-Tsemay districts where more than five ethnic communities are living. As one informant said “the park has been visited by tourists due to its cultural and natural resources diversity”. This, the informant said could be considered as a good destiny of the park, but if we look at the undesirable and harmful practices of local such as burning grass, poaching and encroachment have been hindering tourism development in the park.

River Omo and its landscape feature:

Besides to these wildlife areas, river Omo which is one of major rivers in Ethiopia and a feeder of Lake Turkana is attracting many tourists. This river is the second largest river stream in Ethiopia with its total area and distance covered. The river was found to be suitable for boating and fishing as well as photography (fig. 3). The river in *Karo kebele* gives tourists a good idea of the scenic beauty and many opportunities to take pictures of the very unique landscape. Down



in *Omo Ratie* administrative town of *Dassenech* Woreda, tourists usually have boating services to go to village and numerous fishing opportunities (see fig. 4).



**Figure 3:** Scenic view at Karo: river Omo and Murle control hunting area (photo by Ermias on December 18, 2015)



**Figure 4:** River Omo in Dassenech Omo ratie: tourist visit villages by passing the river using local boats (photo by Ermias on December, 2015)

## Cultural Resources/Attractions

### Lower Omo valley archaeological sites

The UNESCO registered World Heritage site called lower valley of Omo archaeological and paleo-anthropological site is found in Nyangatom Woreda at N4 47 60 E35 58 0 (see fig. 5). The site was registered in 1980 following 10 years of excavation between 1965 and 1975. According to UNESCO, the site was considered to be a world heritage site for the archaeological discoveries of human evolution and related evidence such as 200 teeth, four jaws, a partial skeleton, parts of two skulls, and a leg bone. Such discoveries represent the earliest hominid remains, dated up to about 3 million years ago which are similar to those from Hadar and Laetoli



are ascribed as *Australopithecus afarensis*, *Paranthropus aethiopicus* (dated 2.7 to 2.3 million years ago -mya), *Paranthropus boisei* (2.2 mya) and an early species of *Homo* such as *Homo erectus* (dated 1.4 mya) and *Homo. sapiens* (perhaps 130,000 years ago). The Old Stone Age tools called Oldwana stone tools first appeared here between 2.4 and 2.3 mya and at this archaeological site. Since the site has become an important world heritage area and different archaeological and paleontological researches have been undertaking work there the area is important.

Most world heritage sites are accessible to tourists but this heritage site was found to be inaccessible due to the ongoing research and excavation at the areas of the site (UNESCO, 2015). We were told that the archaeological and paleo-anthropological sites found in *Nyangatom*, *Dassenech* and *Hamer* were not accessible for tourists due to security threats. The other reason for inaccessibility, as an informant from Dassenech mentioned, was “natural gas is discovered in the areas where these archaeological and paleoanthropological sites occur, thus government don’t want let tourist visit the area preferring the natural gas over tourism” (interview, January, 2016). The *Kibish* and *Fejej* archaeological and anthropological sites were some of major sites that have huge potential to attract more tourists to the zone but unfortunately they are not accessible due to the aforementioned reasons (Monteil & Kinahan, 13-19 April 2015). Shea (2008) found different stone tools and middle stone age tools in Kibish. Some of his finding includes: Middle Stone Age tools that have resemblance with other archaeological sites in Ethiopia. According to him and other archaeologists, Omo Valley is and will continue to be major destination or laboratory for archaeologists as well as paleoanthropologists from across the world.



**Figure 5:** Mago national park (left picture) and lower Omo valley archaeological site (right picture) (source: brochure of south Omo culture and tourism department, 2015)

### **South Omo Museum and Research Centre**

The South Omo Museum and Research Centre (SORC) was planned in 1990 and then the plan changed into a final design in 1992. Eventually, the first part of the research center was constructed due to support obtained from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany between 1995 and 1999. Thus, the South Omo Museum and Research Centre was initially a research center before it was changed to include a museum and library service which were created by



constructing additional buildings with the support of the Japanese Embassy in Ethiopia in 2009. Since then SORC has been acquiring different cultural items and displaying these in the museum. As an informant from the museum and research center said, SORC has been drawing different interest group attentions including tourists, residents, researchers and NGOs. For tourists' the museum provides twelve ethnic communities' cultural items, descriptions about their culture and about their origins. The museum provides videos for tourists showing the local communities traditional practices. Different websites of especially tour operators, demonstrate that SORC is the most sold and promoted attraction. Tourists have also commented on the Jinka Museum and have said that the museum is very attractive and is a must visit destination before going to the actual tribal areas. Below are comments of various tourists on the museum:

A tourist who visited the museum and different tribes in January 2015 commented that he liked the museum design and the collections.

This museum is really, really good. It's better than the Ethnic museum in Addis. It may not have as many items but they are displayed better with good lighting. One of the great features is a project where women talk (you have to read it) about various tribal customs. The great thing is that it was a group discussion among women from various tribes so they commented on each other's customs.

Another tourist who visited the museum in the same year in November, commented:

"Worth visiting but...There are a small number of displays which reflect local cultures, tribes and history. The most interesting thing was the video we were shown (in English) which focused on a TV-based intrepid traveler's time with a local tribe (including some graphic depictions of drinking curdled cow's blood). Unfortunately, the video kept stalling (VCR not DVD) and we couldn't complete the viewing.

A tourist who visited the museum In October 2014 was very happy with what he saw in the museum and thus expressed his feeling as follow:

Unfortunately, the Museum was closed on the Ethiopian National Holiday when we visited. A small boy from Ari Tribe came and helped us. A German Anthropologist working there told us it was a holiday but opened the door to us, and the Museum was fantastic... you can also see documentary films as well.

A South African academic visitor to Mursi said:

A highly visually appealing cultural place but the zoo-like atmosphere is unpleasant but rather tough to take and my driver said that it was not possible to find a good guide and pointed to all the bad ones I should avoid at all costs..

A female tourists visited the museum in October 2014 and she recommended even then, that tourists first visit the museum before going down to the tribes of the zone. She advised as follows: "Please visit the Musuem first before going to visit other Omo valley regions if you first arrive in Jinka first".

### **Cultural events and traditional ceremonies**

According to our observations and informant interviews there are unique cultural events in all nine ethnic communities. However, we only found some of the events that are celebrated or took place being commercialized or changed into viable tourism products.



Wedding ceremonies in the nine ethnic communities had their own unique features that can attract and provide a wonderful unique experience for tourists. Of all the wedding ceremonial events that had taken place in these different ethnic communities, Hamer's wedding ceremony was found to be the only one which was well promoted and made available to tourists in the zone. According to our observations and informants' statements (December, 2015), it was evident that in Hamer there were more than five cultural showplaces (areas where boys jump over bulls before they get married). When planned, promoted and accessible, cultural events such as these can inevitably become viable tourism products (Coelho & Brázio, 2014). In this regard, it is not all the cultural events that we found to be commercialized but rather very few in some ethnic communities.

The second cultural event which has been well supported by tourists is an evening dance called '*evangadi*' in Hamer. It is a cultural event that has been shown to tourists in the evening by Hamer youngsters (Gedecho and Guangul, 2016; Lydal, 2010; Strecker, 1970). Though the practice of evening dance is a common cultural practice with the Bena, tourists prefer to see this practice in Hamer. Besides the '*evangadi*', the bull jumping was recognized as a strong cultural practice of the Hamer community (interview, May 2016).

The third cultural event which has not been presented to tourists any time is the '*donga*' game (stick-fighting) which Mursi and Bodi boys engage in. It is a potential cultural event that can be enjoyed by tourists and a similar practice is common in South African Zulu tribal cultural practices. This cultural event had not taken place at the time of the survey. According to an informant from *Salamago* culture and tourism office, the '*donga*' game of Mursi and Bodi has never taken place for tourists (interview, May 2016). The questionnaire survey results demonstrate that the '*donga*' game is not well known and has not been experienced by the vast majority of tourists. However, the current authors in a previous research initiative, have reported that the '*donga*' is a harmful traditional practice that should not be practiced anymore, but it could be at least be shown to tourists with some sort of modification and thus be choreographed fighting.

The fourth cultural resource found in all ethnic communities is of course, local lifestyle (house design, daily life, feeding, work division, dressing, body decoration and other aspects). Body decoration for example is common in Karo, Hamer, Mursi, Gnyangatom, Bodi and Dassenech. The communities decorate their bodies by painting them using different colors and styles. In this regard, Karo boys' body decorations are unique in that the boys use two different colors (white and a reddish hue) to paint on their different parts of their body; face, leg, arm and abdomens (see fig below). Karo's boys, according to a local guide whom we interviewed, decorate themselves anytime tourists visit their village. This means this resource is being consumed by tourists visiting Karo village since they take photos (table 2). Next to Karo's artistic endeavours, Mursi's body colour decoration was the second most adorable and utilizable asset for tourists to view.



Figure 6: Photo that shows Mursi women's lip (photo from [www.nationalparks-worldwide.info](http://www.nationalparks-worldwide.info))

Villages around *Keyafer* such as *Aregemed*, *Hailembie*, *Alduba*, *Befo* and *Luka* were some of the villages visited by tourists in Bena-tsemay wereda. In South Ari, three villages namely *Geza/yetnebersh*, *Gerp/Sefera* and *Metser/Dordora* were visited by tourists due to their proximity to Jinka and the cultural practice the villages offer such as pottery and baking (enset). Villages of Hamer, Karo





**Figure 7:** Villages of Karo (the two upper photos) and Hamer (the lower picture) Communities visited by tourist (photo by authors)

### Tourist perspective on South Omo Tourism

The findings were revealed in table 2 below. Out of the nine communities, four were visited by more than 50 percent of the respondents. Mursi was visited by 97.7 % of tourists and Hamer was visited by 93.2%. In contrast, *Erborie* and *Nyangatom* were visited by 2.4 % and 4.9% of tourists respectively. An informant interview with the zonal and district culture and tourism offices confirmed this finding by saying; “most tourist visit Hamer, Mursi, Karo and Ari and to some extent Dassenech” (interview, December 2015). Moreover, the package tour operators sell to tourists revealed that Mursi and Hamer are the most promoted and packaged communities by tour companies based in Addis Ababa (see table below). During our stay and after three visits to the zone we saw large numbers of tourist visiting the two communities. Furthermore, local guides at Karo told us that they are at least visited by ten tourists every day during the peak season. Local guides at Dassenech told us that tourists visit Dassenech wereda less frequently (interview, December 2015). This means that even though all the communities have tourism resources only four ethnic communities are in fact visited by most of the tourists visiting South Omo. This calls for the urgent development of tourism in the other ethnic communities. This doesn't only help the ethnic community in terms of being visited but it also helps to increase tourist length of stay in the zone and adds economic value.

**Table 2:** Visited Vs Rarely visited Community (tourist view)

Have you visited?	Yes (%)	No (%)	Total
Hamer (n=44)	93.2	6.8	100.0
Erborie (n= 41)	2.4	97.6	
Mursi (n=43)	97.7	2.3	
Nyangatom (n=41)	4.9	95.1	
Dassenech (n=43)	51.2	48.8	
Karo (n=42)	64.3	35.7	
Bena (n=41)	36.6	63.4	
Tsemay (n=43)	23.3	76.7	
Ari (n=42)	69.0	31.0	

Source: Authors survey, 2015/2016



Table 3 shown below revealed that tourists visiting south Omo carried out the following practices: visited a village, attended cultural events, visited open markets, took photographs of lifestyle and wildlife viewing/birdwatching. Such activities were also observed by Fikadu (2012) and Turton (2010) in Hamer and Mursi respectively,

**Table 3:** Activities carried out by tourists

Possible activities carried out by tourist visiting South Omo	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Attend cultural events	31	20.5	20.5
Visit villages	36	23.8	44.4
Visit open markets	32	21.2	65.6
Take photo of lifestyles	34	22.5	88.1
Wildlife viewing/bird watching	15	9.9	98.0
Other	3	2.0	100.0
Total	151	100.0	

Source: Authors' survey, 2015/2016

As shown in table 4 below, Hamer was the first ranked community with an average rank score of 1.7, Karo ranked second with average score of 2.83 and *Dassenech* ranked third with an average rank score of 3.0. *Tsemay*, *Erborie* and *Nyangatom* were ranked from seven to nine with average rank scores of 5.2, 6.5 and 7.0 respectively. However, Mursi was the most visited community next to Hamer in the zone, when it comes to tourist preferences it was mostly less preferred than *Karo* and *Dassenech* (communities that are less visited than Mursi).

**Table 4:** Preferred communities by tourists

Name of the tribes	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Hamer	20	1	4	1.70	.923	1
Karo	12	1	9	2.83	2.250	2
Dassenech	8	2	6	3.00	1.309	3
Mursi	19	1	7	3.32	1.827	4
Ari	14	1	8	3.57	2.065	5
Bena	9	2	6	3.78	1.716	6
Tsemay	7	3	7	5.14	1.773	7
Erborie	2	5	8	6.50	2.121	8
Nyangatom	2	5	9	7.00	2.828	9

Source: Authors Survey, 2015/2016

As depicted in table 5 below, unique cultural resources/attractions were the most used criteria in order to promote preference for the tribes (communities) as areas where tourists would most like to visit rather than other areas or tribes. 'Suggested/recommended to visit' was the second most used criteria for ranking the tribes/communities of South Omo. This reason was found to be stronger than others. Those tourists who visited South Omo with tour operators usually visit areas where they buy the itinerary as developed by tour companies. This means areas visited by these tourists are preferred by tour companies. An Australian adult female tourist suggested that there should be more solid tourism information available. She visited four ethnic communities because she was given this suggestion by her travel agent.

The notion of an area free from security threats was the third most cited criterion used for ranking the communities when selecting to visit them. Security threats as shown in table 7 below were observed in all communities with the highest threat being in Mursi. Security



according to Dolnicar (2005), is a determinant factor for a tourism destination to be preferred or not. This means a destination with high levels of security problems is less preferred than a destination with low security problems or none at all.

When asked whether they were doing different activities or not, an informant from Salamago Woreda Culture and Tourism Office replied:

“We are doing nothing. We cannot go to sites where tourists visit; for recording number of visitor or creating awareness among communities due to the matter of fact that we have added limitation in not speaking local languages and facilities to reach there, as well as the security situation which makes it hard to go without having a security guard.”  
 (Interview, February 2015)

The other third most used criteria for ranking community was the accessibility levels of the community. This is major component of tourism products and even for the tourism industry in general. The community that is accessible through a vehicle is preferred to other communities that are not.

**Table 5:** Criteria used to rank and visit the communities

Criteria	Frequency	Valid Percent	Remark
Free from security threat	10	11.4	
Unique cultural resources attraction	30	<b>34.1</b>	
Easily accessible by vehicle	10	11.4	
Told to visit	16	18.2	
Distance from town	7	8.0	
Time it takes to visit tourist attractions of the community	7	8.0	
Presence of accommodation sectors in the nearby attraction	5	5.7	
Other	3	3.4	100.0
Total	88	100.0	

Source: authors' survey, 2016

### Tour operators' role

Table 6 shown below revealed that Hamer, Karo, Mursi and Dassenech are the most packaged and sold ethnic communities among the nine on offer. Almost all tour operators that were selling Ethiopian tourism attractions included most of these ethnic communities. Ari, Erborie and Gnyangatom were sold or included in very few tour operators package (6, 6 and 2 respectively). All tour operators include the following communities: Ari, Bena and Tsemay, in order to show the tourists local lifestyles and other practices in these communities *en route* and at open markets such as Keyafer. This means the favoured activity of most tourists is sightseeing.

Apart from these communities Mago National Park together with Mursi was promoted and sold by majority of tour operators. Murulle was used as a camping site for most safari tour operators. South Omo Museum and Research Centre was the other attraction that was included under some of the tour operators. We didn't see any tour operator that included the Lower Valley of Omo in any of their itineraries or packages.



**Table 6:** Community packaged by tour operators

No.	Community	Number of tour operators (N=15)	Percentage	Remark
2	Bena	10	66.7	sightseeing
3	Dassenech	11	73.3	
4	Erborie	6	40.3	Sight seeing
5	Hamer	14	93.4	
6	Karo	13	86.7	
7	Mursi	13	86.7	Short stay
8	Nyangatom	2	13.3	
9	Tsemay	9	60,0	Mostly the Keyafer market

Source: authors' survey

### Constraints of South Omo's Tourism

Various issues that were believed to affect tourist experience were first identified and then presented for tourists to list or rate where they were in fact observed. Accordingly, tourists identified the following issues to be addressed by concerned body in table 7 below.

**Table 7:** Issues to be addressed

Issues to be addressed	Hamer	Erborie	Karo	Nyangatom	Dassenech	Bena	Tsemay	Ari	Mursi	Total
Expensive	9	0	5	3	3	3	1	3	16	43
Inadequate quality guide	3	1	3	0	1	2	3	1	8	22
Begging	7	1	6	2	5	3	1	4	16	45
Poor signage	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	6
Unfriendly people	1	0	4	1	0	2	0	1	12	21
Lack of first aid	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	2	5	12
Lack of transport option	1	0	2	0	2	1	0	1	4	11
Difficulty in finding F & B	3	0	4	1		1	0	2	9	20
Poor road quality	9	0	8	2	3	3	0	2	13	40
Security threat	3	1	2	2	1	3	1	2	10	25
Lack of interpretive media	4	0	0	1	2	1		2	5	14

Source: Authors' survey, 2015/2016

The highly observed and most recognized issue by 43 tourists was expensiveness of fares and charges tourists need to pay for services they receive. The money local people asked for made travel expensive and was identified as an issue to be addressed by all the respondents. This problem was observed in almost all the communities. This problem was highly observed in the Mursi community. Some tourists expressed their sad feelings about the demand of local people as follows:

Monich Beekx, Dutch female tourist whose age was between 40 and 49, expressed her feelings as follows:

Pay for the village more and walk around for free with no begging around! It is very crowded and everybody wants money or something. It was almost not possible to shoot pictures from the village and the normal lifestyle of people. It is strange that they the locals stand like puppets and do "traditional" thing and stop these when



you are away. I much prefer to see normal life and spontaneous existence. But, by the way, I have enjoyed Ethiopia (Questionnaire survey, February 2016).

An American adult (between 30 and 39 yrs. of age) female tourist stated in her questionnaire:

Instead of allowing tourists to pay each member for pictures, it would be better to ask for a donation to help improve conditions of schools, hospitals, roads and other much needed local infrastructure. That then would allow for pictures to be taken (Questionnaire Survey, February, 2016)

A Spanish male tourist aged between 30 and 39 suggested:

Tickets and guides are so expensive and even more than in Europe (not all white people are rich in their countries). It is easy to pay for visiting a village and walk around and take photos than stress tourists with big groups expecting to be chosen for a photo. I think it is better for the community to pay a fair rate for them than individually like what happens in Hamer.

An American old age male tourist noted:

It would be better to charge one amount of money for a group to visit and use the money for the good of the community, it is not good for everyone to ask for money for every photo. Not a nice experience at all.

The other most observed issue which was highly related with the above issues was begging. Begging was thus the most observed problem in all communities of the zone. Begging was identified as the main challenge which has been observed throughout Ethiopia (Walle, 2010). Begging was also identified as an issue to be addressed by different concerned bodies in the countries (Gedecho, 2014; Mariamawit, 2008; Kaufnaan, 2008). Most of the beggars we observed in zone were children. They beg for plastic bottles by saying "highland, highland". Others were asking for pictures to be taken with them (both children and adults). An Adult aged between 30 and 39 female Spanish tourist said:

Would have preferred an entrance fee like with the one in Hamer and then be able to take pictures freely and not feel pressured by people and having to choose which people I liked to use for the photo. Too stressing! Begging for photos should be reduced (questionnaire 2016).

The third most observed problem or issue that a young female Dutch tourist observed made her recommend that the government should improve levels of infrastructure around the attractions. Another American female tourist stated this in her questionnaire:

I think the practice of bringing tourists to these places encourages begging and alcoholism. It has been a terrible experience and missed opportunity to learn about the culture and really engage and help in a real way. This does nothing to help people here at all.

The fourth most observed problem in the zone was the presence of an inadequate quality tour guide. Tour guides have various roles in the tourism industry and thus require being highly knowledgeable, skillful and trustworthy, otherwise this negatively affects the overall experience of visitors/tourists which eventually has poor consequences and negatively effects a



destinations image and business continuity (Sharma & Chowdhary, 2013). An Israeli young male tourist recommended that all tribes have guides by saying:

In every tribe, you need guides from the government and you then need to be able to visit an office from the government where you pay for the guide, like in Uganda and Tanzania (Questionnaire survey, February 2016).

Swedish citizen couples living in Addis Ababa suggested that local guide association operating at Jinka should not allowed to operate like the 'Mafia' by forcibly charging for services which are then not provided either.

Some informants identified the following issues as constraints for tourism development in their area:

- Lack of educated manpower
- Absence of revenue that goes to local government for tourism development (*Dassenech woreda, Salamago and Dehub Ari*)
- Offices with financial problem which are hence unable to undertake different activities in time
- Inadequate infrastructural development such as electricity, telephone, road and water

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings show that South Omo zone is rich in cultural tourism resources with its great diversity of natural attractions. Mago National Park, Murrule control hunting area and river Omo as well as the deserts of the Omo valley are valuable natural tourism resources. The zone is more suitable and preferred for cultural tourism activities more specifically ethnic tourism rather than nature based tourism alone. The diverse cultural practices of the sixteen ethnic communities and their lifestyle as well as their philosophy of life are unique and mysterious to the outsiders including the majority of Ethiopians. As a result, it appeals to both domestic and international tourists and thus needs to be fittingly commercialized and changed into a special tourism product.

Out of the sixteen ethnic communities of the zone eleven were investigated from their tourism potential and development levels. The researchers found that all ethnic communities have their own tourism resources that can attract tourists. However, when it comes to tourist observations and their experiences, only four ethnic communities were being visited by more than fifty percent of tourists. These include the Hamer, Mursi, Karo, Dassenech and Ari communities. According to tourist preferences and tour packages selected of more than 80% of Tour Companies based in Addis Ababa, Hamer and Mursi were the most visited and preferred ethnic communities among the tribes of south Omo this was primarily due to their unique and exotic cultural practices.

Findings revealed that four ethnic communities were not accessible to tourists at all due to four fundamental reasons including safety and security issues, poor road infrastructure, the great distance from the main towns where there are accommodation facilities and finally, absence of cultural shows and other tourism products.



It is thus very important for Ethiopian Tourism to consider the following recommendations if ethnic tourism is to be developed to the satisfaction of foreign and local tourists. There is a need to:

- Develop cultural show centers in all ethnic communities that have none
- Improve road infrastructural quality in order to have safe travel and visits throughout the year
- Train local guides to be ethical, skillful and supervise their activity on a regular basis
- Orient local people, especially the Mursi's not to be aggressive towards tourists while asking for photographs and also train them ask and receive fair prices for their services
- Promote other ethnic communities as has been done in Hamar and Mursi

Ethiopia offers great opportunity for tourism to be a key driver of the economy, but much work needs to be done to. When most tourists think of Ethiopia, the envisage visits to Aksum and Lalibela but in truth there are many other places of great interest in Ethiopia. The Omo National Park hosts various traditional tribes as well as spectacular wildlife. In this region one witnesses astonishing traditions which have been unchanged for centuries. Karo, Hamar and other tribal groups live in tented villages with their cattle and goats. Visiting such areas is interesting and special. In fact most tribes, including for example, the Mursi, Hamar, Dassanech, have all managed to maintain their culture and still live, for most part as, they have done for many centuries Local infrastructure at other destinations such as those at Omo, need to be upgraded in especially minor towns and road-side villages and it is also critical to develop a professional body of tour guides to show tourists the beauty of the country and encourage tour operators to be sensitive to all areas in their marketing initiatives. For example, a tribal tour could start from Arba Minch and go straight to Mago National Park Mursi Village where tourists can spend an unforgettable night. The programme can followed by Ari, Hamar, Dasanch, Kara, bull jumping, open market visits and a Dorze tribe encounter.

The South Omo Research Center (SORC) also offers an exceptional opportunity to reflect upon the multifaceted issues facing the people of South Omo today and also in their past. SORC recounts the transformation occurring amongst the miscellaneous cultures of southern Ethiopia. The Zonal Administration and the Department of Culture and Tourism have displayed a valuable interest in embarking on a longitudinal and applied study of tourism in South Omo and according to Dr. Shauna La Tosky, Director of SORC (La Tosky, 2016), "Major research and community-based initiatives this year includes projects devoted to 'Responsible Tourism' in South Omo; the role of the SORC Museum in providing intercultural awareness and understanding to visitors (including local schoolchildren), the links between narratives, music and social change, and the role of bridewealth across ethnic boundaries". South Omo is seemingly in good tourism development hands now.

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