

# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

## Africa's Last Frontier

*Ethiopia's Omo Valley is still a place ruled by ritual and revenge.*

*But change is coming, from upriver.*



Above fields of sorghum, girls chew sweet stalks after laying out seeds to dry. Annual flooding not only helps farmers grow food but also renews grazing lands for herders' livestock. A ten-day, artificial flood has been proposed to mimic the natural cycle once the dam is completed—a remedy critics say is inadequate.

his brother's safety. He had an idea where Dunga had gone, and he was furious.

The brothers had grown up as Kara boys do—chasing animals through the bush with bows and arrows. They pulled guard duty in the sorghum fields, slinging clay pellets at thieving birds. They learned to beware of crocodiles during the wet season, when the Omo runs high and dark with sediment. And they learned the foundation of male responsibility: care for the herds.

Along the Omo, cattle and goats embody wealth and prestige. Without them a man is considered poor and, in most tribes, cannot get married because he has nothing to offer as a bride-price. In time of famine the animals can be sold for food or their milk, and blood can be slowly siphoned off, like interest. Abandoning your cattle is like dumping your family's savings into the river.

Kornan selected a slender stick, then marched to the nearby schoolhouse and found Dunga there. The brothers were close, but this? Leaving the herd for school? Kornan beat Dunga until the

boy wept. Some 15 years later Dunga tenses as he remembers the blows. The next morning, soot and chastened, Dunga led the cattle to water at dawn. But a few days later he ran away to school again. And Kornan beat him again.

"I loved Kornan," Dunga said. "He was a father for me, he was everything. But my mind was going to school."

The beatings hardened Dunga's resolve, but they seemed to soften Kornan's. He had been to school himself for a few years, and he eventually realized punishment wouldn't dissuade Dunga. They struck a deal. The boy could go to school as long as he achieved good grades. If his performance fell, he'd be back in the bush with the herd. Dunga was ecstatic. He advanced to a boarding school in a nearby town, each grade taking him deeper into a new world. He returned home less frequently.

Meanwhile, Kornan had become a respected young leader. He had a wife, several children, and a reputation as an unrivaled hunter. The wives of other men presented Kornan with bullets and

110 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC • MARCH 2010



Boring through a mountain, workers finish a tunnel that will divert the Omo River so a massive hydroelectric dam called Gilgel Gibe III—one of the largest on Earth—can be built. The dam could generate up to 1,670 megawatts of power, which cash-starved Ethiopia plans to sell to its neighbors.