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[The People of the Lipplates](#)

A very strange cultural habit

In the mountains of South West Ethiopia, at over 800 m on 45 square km, lives a tribe of 2500 semi nomads called Surma. Surma are related to the Nubians and to the well known Massai tribe from Kenya and Tanzania. Like Massai, they are largely pastoralists, and put a high value on cattle but they also plant maize, millet and sorghum. Surma are warriors, implicated in local conflicts with their enemy tribes, Bumi and Dizi (distantly related to Somali people). Annually, Suma people organize a warrior rite called donga, of stick fighting. But what really captures the attention of a foreigner are the lipplates and the habit of body painting. The lipplates are worn only by women. While chatting, the tribe's women can remove the plates, but this only in the absence of the men. The goal of the young girls is to wear a larger plate. The larger the plate, the bigger is the number of cattle which the parents can pretend as dowry. The origin of this habit is very ancient. For the biggest plates, up to 5 inches in diameter, the parents can ask more than 50 cattle. The plates are colored using red and black powder; after drying, the plate is burned for 20 minutes. Inserting the plate in the lower lip, a very painful process and which can provoke infections, takes place when the girl is 20 years old, prior to marriage. After the lip's perforation, a small disc is introduced. During one year, it is progressively replaced by larger discs. The present clay plates replaced the more primitive wooden plates which were trapezoidal. Another custom concerns the teenage girls. They must wear an iron pinafore which can weigh more than 4.5 kg (appreciatively 10 pounds). They will have to stand non stop this burden till the marriage. If a girl gets pregnant outside the marriage, she will suffer the humiliation of loosing the right to wear a lipplate, even if [img=2]her partner will be forced to marry her and to pay a cattle dowry to her parents. The Surma also created a kind of body painting. They cover the skin with a mixture of chalk or white clay and water and sometimes add ocher to give color. The many models are designed to impress the women or to intimidate the enemy. Women also decorate their face and breasts to be attractive to the men. And as earring, yes, you guessed, they also insert plates! Suma (both men and women) wear their heads half shaved as a beauty sign. Another tribe which practices the clay lipplate habit are Mursi, the closest relatives to Surma and neighbors to them. They number 3900 souls and like Surma, are cattle herders. Mursi girls are pierced at the age of 15 or 16. Mursi are more in contact with the main Ethiopian population and some 15 % of them are Christians. The rest, like Surma, are animists. In South East Chad and close areas in Central African Republic, live the Sara people and their 12 tribes count with almost 30 % of Chad's population and 10 % of CRA population (in total more than 3 millions). These people are also related with Surma, Nubians or Massai. But they are deeply agricultural. They settled there in the 16th century running away from the Nile area because of the Arab raids. Sara women put the lipplates in both their lips (upper and lower) (photo) to make themselves unattractive to Arab slave raiders. Nowadays, this habit has disappeared amongst this population. The only other population known to use lipplate are Suyu people of Brazil. This fast disappearing tribe only comprises today 196 members. In Suyu, only men wear wooden lipplates (photo)and also disc earrings like Sura women. Theirs discs lengthen the circumference of their lips to between 7 to 8 centimeters. These rituals begin when boys reach puberty and, of course, are realized in order to increase their attractiveness.