



## EUROPEAN VIEWS ON ELMOLO ETHNIC GROUP (KENIA, 1887-1975): The Normalization of Vanishing Africa

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article examines thirteen journeys undertaken between 1887 and 1973 to Kenya by explorers, anthropologists, and artists, in order to assess the image they conveyed of the Elmolo People through their writings, illustrations, and photographs. It reveals how each expedition inherited a distorted view, shaped by ideas such as poverty, risk of extinction, fishing, silence, shyness, hospitality, ritual hippo hunting, and interethnic relations. Colonial stereotypes — notably the notion of a Vanishing Africa — became normalised. The article offers a new perspective by incorporating the photographic gaze, whose static and often stereotyped depictions contrast with the supposed progress of textual knowledge.*

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## 1. Introduction

Western accounts of the Elmolo people, from the first trip made by Teleki in 1887 to that of anthropologist Carole Scherrer in 1973, are analyzed to assess the evolution of views on this ethnic group, who lived along what was then called Lake Rudolf, today Lake Turkana. Both the written narrative gaze and the visual, graphic and photographic gaze that resulted from those trips are included. Each perspective reflected different worlds and times. In total, thirteen expeditions left textual and/or graphic traces of the Elmolo community in public form. These can be grouped, according to the specialty of their authors, into explorers, ethnographers, and, finally, artists. All were white and from European nations, except for the American Donaldson Smith.

European explorers travelled inland when the African coast was colonized. There was also some sporadic continental travel, such as that of the missionary Pedro Paez to Ethiopia (1618). Livingstone was the first Westerner to cross the continent from Luanda to Mozambique (1853-1856). More expeditionaries followed: the German Johannes Rebmann to Mount Kilimanjaro (1848); the Frenchman Henri Duveyrier to the Sahara (1849); or the British Speke and Burton reconnoitering Lake Victoria and the sources of the Nile (1862) (Koivunen, 2008). After the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885, expeditions to the uncharted territories began in British East Africa on the border with Abyssinia (Ethiopia). The Austro-Hungarian Count Samuel Teleki was the first explorer of this saga in the 19th century (Brown, 1989).

The second group was formed by ethnographers such as Paul Spencer and Carole Scherrer in the 1950s and 1970s. They were the only ones to have devoted themselves to the Elmolo from the standpoint of ethnology. It coincided with the time of *Vanishing Africa* (Littlefield and Kasfir, 2013, pp. 1-5) and the years when visual anthropology began to play an increasingly important role (Edwards and R.A.I. of G.B, 1992). There was also a community of artists who engaged individually with Elmolo life through a literary (such as the journalist Hillaby) or visual (such as Joy Adamson and Paul Beard) prism. Creative artists from different fields between 1945 and 1967 also produced works that mention the Elmolo people.

This legacy of African frames of representation "generated a wealth of negative images of Africa and Africans. Black Africans were generally depicted in a variety of stereotypical ways: savage, primitive, childish, lazy, exotic, sexually attractive, or deviant" (Koivunen, 2008, p. 4). Each expeditionary inherited this distorted image. Thus, there was continuity in the normalization of the colonial stereotypes of the narrative in the "encounter with the other".

For Western countries, African history began with the Berlin Conference (1884-1885), but the reality was different: Africa continued its own history. The spread of Islam throughout North Africa and the central Sahara (from 630 aC), reached by sea to the East Africa. Arabs, Persians and Indians founded flourishing colonies (Malindi and Mombasa - in Kenya - and Sofala - in Mozambique). They were city-states of Swahili Muslim culture, of great commercial activity with ivory, sandalwood, and gold (University of Iowa, 2006). This rich activity was encountered by Vasco da Gama in 1499 on his way to India. The Portuguese rule of alliances with tribal leaders remained on the Kenyan coast for two centuries, until the Portuguese defeat of the Swahili in Mombasa (1740), later defeated by the Sultanate of Zanzibar (1832).

In 1895, the British government in London established the administration of British East Africa and promoted the construction of a railway between Mombasa and Port Florence (today's Kisumu, Kenya) on Lake Victoria. This line allowed access to Uganda, a junction accessible by rail from the Indian Ocean and by river from Egypt via the Nile. This line carried several explorers to the starting point of their forays into the unknown lands of the north in British East Africa.

## 2. General and specific objectives

The general objective (GO) of this research is to analyse thirteen written and visual Western accounts of the Elmolo ethnic group, who still live near Lake Turkana today, published between 1887 and 1975, in order to assess the creation and consolidation of colonial stereotypes and the idea of *Vanishing Africa* through the documents and images produced by explorers, ethnographers, and artists who travelled to East Africa from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth. The initial date corresponds to the first expedition carried out in this territory in 1887, and the final one to the last record before the

cultural disappearance of this ethnic group in 1976, when the Kenyan government enacted the Lake Species Protection Act, which prohibited hunting and transformed the lifestyle of the settlements.

The specific objectives are:

EO1. To examine the importance of images in these narratives.

EO2. To analyse the contribution of the different perspectives (explorers, anthropologists, and artists) to the collective imaginary of the Elmolo.

'Vanishing Africa' refers to the depiction of traditional African cultures that are perceived as being on the brink of extinction. This concept exoticises and freezes African cultures in time, ignoring their capacity for adaptation, and reinforces the Western narrative that portrays Africa as a primitive place (Coombes, 1994; Edwards & Hart, 2004; Pinney, 2011).

### 3. Methodology

A descriptive historical methodology is employed to evaluate the documentary output of and about these travellers (see Table 1). The selection was based on the written works in which the expeditionaries recorded their own journeys. These travellers were familiar with, and cited, the works of their predecessors in order to traverse those lands, so that one author led to another. Brown (1989) also compiled a list of the expeditionaries to the lake. Once these authors had been identified, all textual references to the Elmolo people were sought in their works, as well as the illustrations and photographs of the Elmolo ethnic group included in each book, present in 13 of the 24 authors analysed.

Descriptions of the Elmolo society, culture, and nutrition are considered, as well as the images that accompanied these descriptions. The impact of the authors' circumstances (historical, technological, and social context, among other aspects) on their intentions is also considered.

**Table 1.** Explorers and date of their expedition under analysis

Explorers	Artists/Journalists	Anthropologists
Samuel Teleki y Ludwig Höhnel, 1887-1888	Merrel Dalton, 1947	Paul Spencer, 1957-1962
Arthur Henry Neumann, 1893	Joy Adamson, 1947	Joann Carole Scherrer, 1973-1975
Arthur Donaldson Smith, 1894-1895	John Hillaby, 1963	
Cavendish, 1896-1897	Peter Beard & Alistair Graham, 1967	
Philip Maud, 1902-1903		
Stigand, 1908		
W.S. Dyson y V. E. Fuchs, 1934		

Source: own elaboration, 2025

The empirical and descriptive method is applied to the analysis of the images in order to address the research objective, taking into account two fundamental fields: in general, the meaning of the images and, in particular, the representation of the Elmolo ethnic group. In the first field, the following variables are considered: Cultural codes of colonialism, Representation of the noble savage, Exaltation of exoticism, The white man versus the native, Disappearing Africa, Sensuality of female bodies, Others. In the second field, the following are included: Marginalised people, Poor and sick ethnic group, Danger of extinction, Victims of their environment, Others.

### 4. Analysis

#### 4.1. Teleki and the reconnaissance of Lake Rudolf

Samuel Teleki's expedition, carried out between 1887 and 1888, represents one of the most significant explorations in the history of cartography and geographical knowledge of East Africa. Teleki (1845-1916), a Hungarian nobleman close to Prince Rudolph of Austria, led an expedition to explore unknown territories in present-day northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia. Accompanied by Navy Lieutenant Ludwig von Höhnel, who played the role of cartographer, chronicler, and photographer, the expedition set out from Pangani (Tanzania) on 3 February 1887 (von Höhnel, 1894, p. 37).

The journey, which covered more than 3,000 kilometres through hostile terrain (Borsos, 2005, p. 113), had as one of its first milestones the ascent of Kilimanjaro, where Teleki reached 5,300 meters.

Subsequently, they attempted to climb Mount Kenya. It was an unprecedented achievement (4,300 meters).

However, the main objective of the expedition was to search for a lake that was known from local accounts and previous geographical documents. A map published in 1870 in *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* mentioned the existence of a "Lake Samburu", whose position coincided with that of Lake Rudolf (Wakefield & Jun, 1870, pp. 303-339). Finally, on March 5, 1888, they reached a body of water that Teleki named "Lake Rudolf" in honour of the Austrian prince who had led the expedition (von Höhnel, 1894, p. 94).

The crossing was marked by difficulties, among them the exhaustion of provisions, the hostility of the climate and the scarcity of water resources. A relevant aspect was the contact with the Elmolo people, a small community of fishermen that inhabited the shores of the lake.

"The next day we resumed our march towards the lake [...] [A villager] also said that Mount Kulal was inhabited, but that its inhabitants suffered from famine, and that the wretched Elmolo [emphasis added] who lived by the lake, supported themselves entirely by fishing" (von Höhnel, 1894: 96-98).

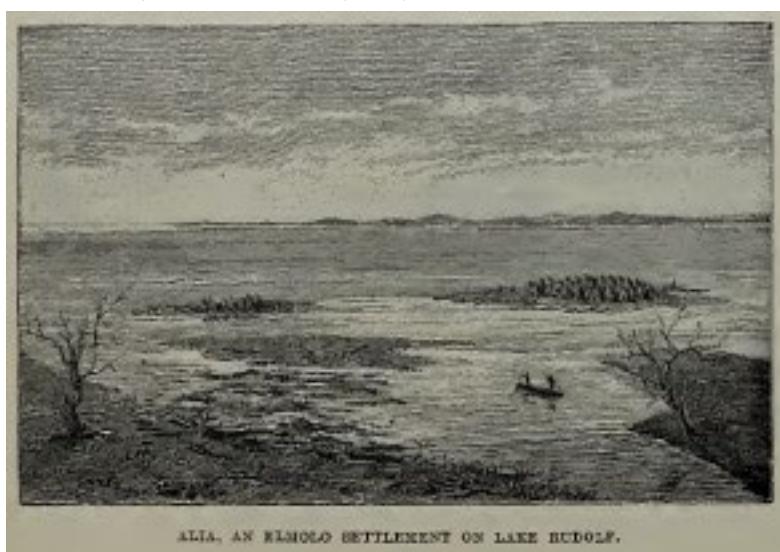
This is the first written historical mention of the Elmolo community in Western culture after the recognition of the lake.

The expedition recorded the existence of three settlements that it called Elmolo. A first group on Elmolo Island, which is where the present tribe lives: "about 200 or 300" (von Höhnel, 1894, p. 111). A second group was located in Alia Bay, 100 km north of the first camp (Figure 1). There resided "between 150 and 200 inhabitants who live almost exclusively from fishing" (von Höhnel, 1894, p. 132). The third group was the Reshiat people, settled on the northern shore of the lake, south of Ethiopia (von Höhnel, 1894, p. 111). However, information on the population and organization of these settlements proved inconsistent. Höhnel noted that the Elmolo were, in fact, an amalgamation of groups from various ethnic backgrounds, which complicated their classification as a distinct group.

Their character was described as fearful and distrustful (von Höhnel, 1894, pp. 109-110). There were also signs of fear at the display of firearms, suggesting their lack of contact with Europeans and their history of attacks by neighboring tribes such as the Samburu, Turkana and Rendille (Brown, 1989, p. 81). Nevertheless, despite their isolation, their hospitality was also remarked upon: "the Elmolo offered visitors their meager possessions, material and immaterial" (Scherrer, 1978, p. 82).

Another key aspect of the expedition's legacy was its contribution to the photography and visual documentation of East Africa. Although most of the images were lost during World War II, some of the photographs taken by Höhnel were preserved in the National Museum of Hungary in Budapest and were subsequently published in the 1970s (Lajos, 1977). These images reflected the cultural codes of the colonial era, which were dominated by dichotomies between civilization and primitivism, European and native (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009).

Figure 1. Illustration by A. Mielichhofer (1894). "Alia, an Elmolo settlement on Lake Rudolf".



Source: Höhnel, L., Bell, N. R. E. M., & Teleki, S. (1894). *Discovery of lakes Rudolf and Stefanie; a narrative of Count Samuel Teleki's exploring & hunting expedition in eastern equatorial Africa in 1887 & 1888*

Despite the importance of the expedition in the history of African exploration, the data collected on the Elmolo and other communities in the region were insufficient for an accurate ethnographic study. This expedition focused primarily on geographic and cartographic aspects, leaving research on local communities in the background. In addition, the scarcity of written sources and the impossibility of obtaining reliable demographic data contributed to the perception of the Elmolo as a marginalized, poor, and endangered group, a concept that was later reinforced in studies of *Vanishing Africa*.

#### **4.2. Arthur Henry Neumann and his vision of the Elmolo**

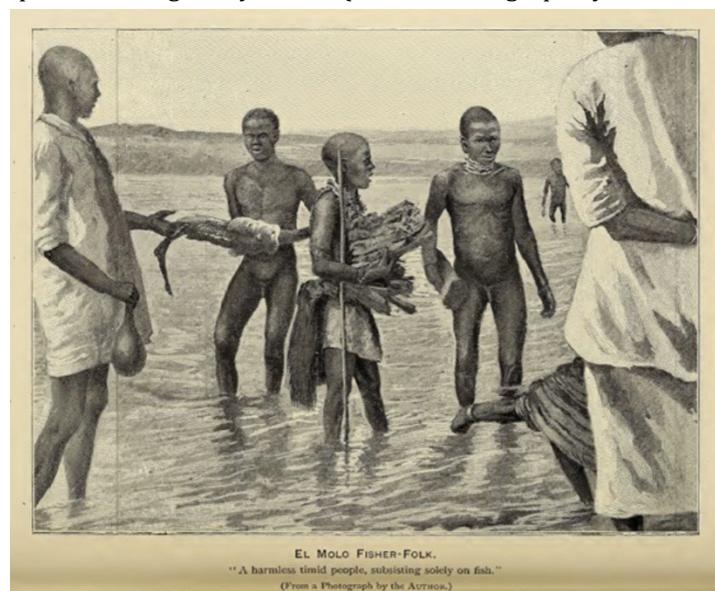
Arthur Henry Neumann, a British ivory trader in Africa (Brown, 1993), set out in 1893 from Mombasa with the intention of hunting elephants (Neumann, 1898). His expedition, composed of fifty men, covered, in fourteen months, almost 800 km on foot to the interior and northeast of Africa. During the journey, they faced various difficulties, such as lack of water, desertion of porters and attacks by wild animals.

The account of his expedition contained illustrations by artists such as John Guille Millais and Edmund Caldwell, as well as maps and zoological lists, including the discovery of three new species of butterflies (Neumann, 1898, p. 437). Neumann was interested in photographically documenting his trip, but was unable to obtain images of sufficient quality. Nevertheless, of the 64 illustrations included in his book, 26 were based on photographs, 11 of which had been taken by Neumann himself. In addition to narrating the elephant hunt, the book contains observations about the peoples he encountered along the way, including the Elmolo, to whom he devoted several chapters and images (Figure 2).

Unlike Teleki and Höhnel, Neumann described the Elmolo ethnic group in a more poetic and contemplative tone (Table 2). Of their relationship to the lake, he wrote: "I was not surprised by the preference of these [Elmolo] people for the lake, with its inexhaustible wealth of food. Its fertility in fish is simply marvellous. What immense quantities they must consume daily." (Neumann, 1898, p. 267). In another passage, he noted the tranquillity that the region evoked (Neumann, 1898, p. 266).

He described this ethnic group as a peaceful and isolated community, dedicated exclusively to fishing. He also noted their friendly character (Neumann, 1898, p. 5). He emphasized the difference between the Elmolo and the *ndorobo*, something that Teleki and Höhnel had not highlighted: "The Elmolo, aboriginal fishermen, are much blacker and with a very different language" (Neumann, 1898, p. 267).

**Figure 2.** Illustration by John Guille Millais, Edmund Caldwell or George Edward Lodge. "A harmless timid people, subsisting solely on fish (From a Photograph by the Author)".



Source: Neumann, A. H. (1898). *Elephant-hunting in east equatorial Africa*.

He also gave a detailed description of the community's methods of fishing. He observed how they used collective nets, describing the process with great precision. He also documented the construction

of boats: "They are each built with several small palm tree trunks, tied side by side; [for] there are no trees with trunks large enough to make the usual type of dug-out canoes" (Neumann, 1898, p. 265).

**Table 2.** Comparative analysis of the images contributed by travellers to East Africa (1887-1975)

Traveller	Purpose of the Journey	Meaning of the images	Representation of the Elmolo ethnic group
Samuel Teleki y Ludwig Höhnel, 1887-1888	Exploration	Cultural codes of colonialism	Marginalised people and at risk of extinction
Arthur Henry Neumann, 1893	Ivory trade	Representation of the noble savage	Marginalised and self-sufficient people
Arthur Donaldson Smith, 1894-1895	Exploration	Exaltation of exoticism	Poor ethnic group
Cavendish, 1896-1897	Exploration	Cultural codes of colonialism	No contact with the Elmolo people
Philip Maud, 1902-1903	Exploration	The white man versus the native	No images of the Elmolo ethnic group
Stigand, 1908	Exploration	Cultural codes of colonialism	Poor ethnic group
W.S. Dyson y V. E. Fuchs, 1934	Exploration, medicine	Nutritional problems	At risk of extinction
Merrel Dalton, 1947	Informative support	<i>Vanishing Africa</i>	Tribal life
Joy Adamson, 1947	Artistic gaze	<i>Vanishing Africa</i>	Tribal life
Paul Spencer, 1957-1962	Anthropology	Refuting <i>Vanishing Africa</i>	Cultural elements specific to the Elmolo people
John Hillaby, 1963	Journalistic account	Exaltación del exotismo	Victims of their environment. Human perspective
Peter Beard & Alistair Graham, 1967	Journalistic account	Sensuality of female bodies	Poor and sick ethnic group
Joann Carole Scherrer, 1973-1975	Anthropology	The importance of nature	Victims of their environment

Source: own elaboration, 2025

In short, Neumann's expedition provided knowledge about elephant hunting, and about the life of the Elmolo people. His accounts contributed to building the image of this people as an isolated, self-sufficient, and peaceful community.

#### **4.3. The Arthur Donaldson Smith expedition. The sacred mammal**

Donaldson Smith (1866-1939) started his journey from Somaliland and traversed southern Ethiopia and Abyssinia, the latter with the permission of Menelik II: an exception to the restrictions on Western governments. The trip lasted 18 months. He presented the results in a paper to the Royal Geographical Society on 6 January 1896.

As for the Elmolo, he noted that there were about a thousand people in two villages, one located in Alia Bay with 300, and another on the mainland near Mount Kulal with 700 (Donaldson Smith, 1896, p. 227). These data would later clash with those noted by Neuman on his 1894 trip: "the Elmolo said that they lived in the water and [that] they only landed on the shore to procure firewood. Even then, they stated, they never go further beyond the shore" (Neumann, 1898, p. 265). It is most likely that Donaldson Smith's second settlement was not Elmolo.

In addition to the lecture presented in two articles, Donaldson Smith described the expedition in greater detail: *Through Unknown African Countries: the First Expedition from Somaliland to Lake Rudolf* (Donaldson Smith, 1897). The publication thrived on the exotic, generated, among other things, by the newly emerging "yellow press." His photographs were initially converted into lithographs and engravings, but later, with the development of printing techniques, they were published directly in magazines, newspapers and books (Gordon & Kurzwelly, 2018, p. 5). While science collected the textual and visual look with illustrations in an article, the general public consumed reports of the expedition.

Donaldson Smith reaffirmed that Elmolo group is "the name given to the people around Lake Rudolf who live by hunting and fishing, just as the Maasai name of wandorobo is applied to the poor people in other parts of the country" (Donaldson Smith, 1897, p. 327). Again, the idea of poverty was repeated. The book included a narrative that would later become important. It also showed an aspect of the Elmolo that was hitherto unknown in the West:

On August 19 we arrived at the village of burkeneji Elmolo, a little north of Elmolo Bay, where there were about seventy huts. [...] The Elmolo begged me to shoot the hippos, as they had not eaten meat for a long time. [...] I opened fire and shot two of them in the head. The Elmolo dragged the hippos to the shore impatiently and drank the warm blood (Donaldson Smith, 1897, p. 333).

The sacredness of the hippopotamus for the Elmolo community was mentioned for the first time. The ritual of the great mammal of the lake was later described in depth by Carole Scherrer (Scherrer, 1978, p. 112) and shown in photographs for the first time by Mohamed Amin (1981). Finally, Arthur Donaldson Smith's visual record did not include depictions of the Elmolo in the 66 illustrations of the book. The word was still ahead of the image in the construction of the story of this ethnic group.

#### **4.4. The Cavendish expedition. The beginning of a legend**

A British aristocratic millionaire, Cavendish (1876-1948) made his voyage between 1896 and 1897. Cavendish focused on the tribes on the western shore of Lake Rudolf. He made hardly any mention of the Elmolo people. His contribution is centered on an account that he included in the paper that recorded his address to the Royal Geographical Society in London on January 31, 1898:

It is said that about thirty years ago the lake dried up at this end and that some Elmolo fishermen, of the same tribe as those living in Alia, had their village on the upper Elmolo, with their sheep and goats. One morning they woke up surrounded by water and, as they had no boats, they have not been able to reach dry land since (Cavendish, 1898, pp. 372-393).

It is the only reference to the legend of the Elmolo on the South Island of Lake Rudolf. Apart from the subject, it included a map of the voyage and five illustrations. The latter show Cavendish's relative interest in photography.

#### **4.5. Philip Maud's expedition. A failed attempt on the Maud line**

Philip Maud, a British military engineer, fixed the Maud line as the border between Kenya and Abyssinia (Ethiopia). The Berlin conference set the criteria for the division of African territories except for Abyssinia and Liberia. The Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II limited European expansion and pushed the frontier to the southern end of Lake Rudolf. England considered it an encroachment on the territory of British East Africa. Maud set out on an official expedition from Djibouti - in French Somalia in the Gulf of Aden in September 1902 - and crossed Ethiopia southwards on his way to Lake Rudolf, Nakuru and Mombasa (already under British rule). A journey of more than 2000 kilometers, in which he took advantage of the advice of previous explorers (Maud, 1904).

Maud established an imaginary line from Ethiopia's Lake Chew Bahir to the northern end of Lake Rudolf and demarcated what the British considered part of British East Africa. The line was recognized as a boundary in 1907. Maud also made some anthropological notes during his journey to Lake Rudolf. They constitute his narrative look at the Elmolo. On the shore of the lake, he briefly contacted an "isolated section of a subtribe of the Rendille" (Maud, 1904, p. 577), although specifically defined as "Elmolos" by Spencer (Spencer & University of London, 1973, p. 156).

Of great interest is an unsuccessful attempt to take a photograph in May 1903.

I was surrounded by an astonished group and, thinking the opportunity was good, I took out my binocular camera and held it up to take a snapshot. Immediately panic set in. Everyone, except the old man, hastily fled to their huts, and he knelt down, patted and patted my hand like an angry dog, and clearly implored me not to do it [sic] (Spencer & University of London, 1973, p. 577).

It is the second written reference in the visual history of the Elmolo after Neumann (Neumann, 1898, p. 264). Maud's 1904 article for the Royal Geographical Society includes nine photographs, but none referring to the Elmolo. The story does, however, offer the contrast between the science and progress of the white man and the fear of the Elmolo in its original state.

#### **4.6. The Stigand expedition. Money and time**

Stigand (1877-1919), an English military officer and explorer, led his expedition from Nairobi, British East Africa, to Lake Rudolf in April 1908. He confirmed Maud's findings in 1908 and discovered that the Elmolo settlement in Alia Bay was abandoned (Scherrer, 1978, p. 5). Although he never saw them, he defined them as "a mixed community of fishermen from the outcasts of different tribes" (Stigand, 1910, p. 192). He made this attribution from what he had probably read in Maud. The simplification and repetition of the stereotype of poverty attributed to the community began to take shape.

Regarding the graphic visual look, Stigand took photographs. His book published 36 images and 2 maps. None depicted on the Elmolo. And the textual account repeatedly reflects a colonial language of dominance.<sup>1</sup> It also provides observations on the mentality of the explorers and the expeditions.

#### **4.7. The expedition of W. S. Dyson & V. E. Fuchs. The first complete look**

Dyson and Fuchs in 1934 referred to the question of ethnic health in their analysis of the community. They called it the nutritional problem: "It is desirable that the dietary problem now presented by these people should be studied by someone qualified to do so (Dyson & Fuchs, 1937, p. 327).

Visually the impression of bowed legs, poor health and a life of poverty struck these expeditionaries to the point of making it the central theme of their article. It should be noted that Vivian Ernst Fuchs (1908-1999) was a geologist, although the original notes were by Dr. Dyson, who died during the exploration in 1934. Upon returning to England, Fuchs, who embarked on the expedition to study the geological basin of Lake Rudolph for his Ph.D. from Cambridge University (Fuchs, 1939, p. 229), put the doctor's notes in order and published an article in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* (1937), although "without attempting to interpret the medical or anthropological significance" (Fuchs, 1939, p. 327).

On the other hand, Fuchs attempted to clarify the prevailing confusion about the identity and number of the Elmolo in 1934 after studying the results of previous expeditions to Lake Rudolf. Fuchs added that "the census of the tribe taken in July 1934 resulted in a total of only 84 men, women and children" (Fuchs, 1939, p. 330), from which he deduced that - since the Teleki and Höhnel expedition - "the number of Elmolo inhabitants had been greatly reduced in recent years" (Fuchs, 1939, p. 331). For anthropologist Spencer, in this last sentence lies the key to the error that points to the Elmolo as "the smallest tribe in Africa and in danger of disappearing" (Spencer & University of London, 1973, p. 213).

Moreover, Fuchs made a detailed study of the Elmolo's fishing and their processes of manufacturing the objects necessary for it (Dyson & Fuchs, 1937, pp. 331-333). He also described the division of tasks in the village, carried out under the Ubuntu philosophy of collectivity, which permeates Elmolo culture as well as that of many other African communities: "you are because, first, we are" (Letseka, 2012). Nor did he forget observations on other objects and issues: pottery, clothing, and ornaments, among other aspects.

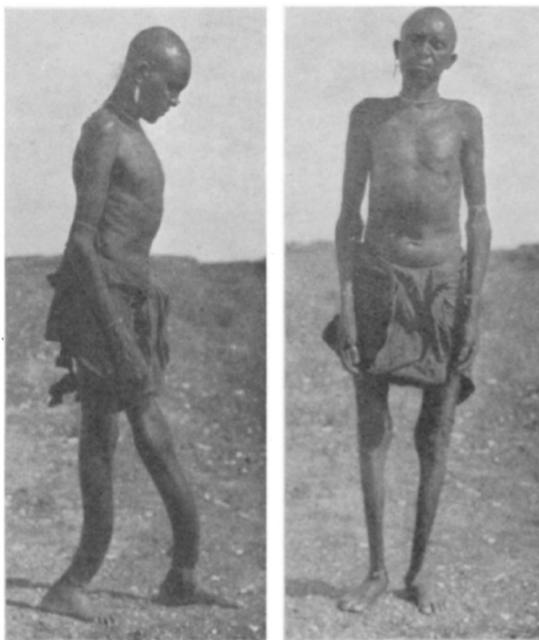
Fuchs and W. Dyson's 1937 study was the first narrative look at the Elmolo written in any depth, and the first historical photographic visual look, because it provides seven photographs in its appendices (*The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*. They were taken by the authors<sup>2</sup>. The annexes are composed of four photographic plates whose objective was to show the sickly and dietetic reality observed by the scientific explorers in 1934 (Figures 3 and 4).

<sup>1</sup> "Much regretting the imprudence of that *African savage* [*african savage*] [...] the most important article for the traveller in *uncivilized* parts [*uncivilized parts*] or [...] some people seem to have the idea that a *naked savage* [*naked savage*] *should be glad to receive anything from a European*, but this is not so." (Stigand, 1910, p. 18).

<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the article Fuchs states that he "wishes to record his thanks to *Ilford Limited*, who supplied all the photographic material for the expedition and who went to the greatest trouble to obtain results from negatives badly affected by heat and delayed development." W. S. Dyson and V. E. Fuchs, "The Elmolo," .327 The problems referred to would probably be the high desert temperatures.

Until then there had been brief mentions of the Elmolo by western expeditionaries. They were all superficial glances: scattered, passing, without great extent. They were limited to the concepts of numbers, settlements, poverty, shyness, fear, fishing, and so on. Secondly, not only illustrations are provided, but photographs edited for this scientific journal.

**Figures 3 and 4.** "A bad case of rickets, side and front views".



Source: W.S. Dyson and V. E. Fuchs (1937), "The Molo." *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 67(1937), 327-338, 339.

#### **4.8. Merrel Dalton's Expedition. A Magazine for Europeans in Kenya**

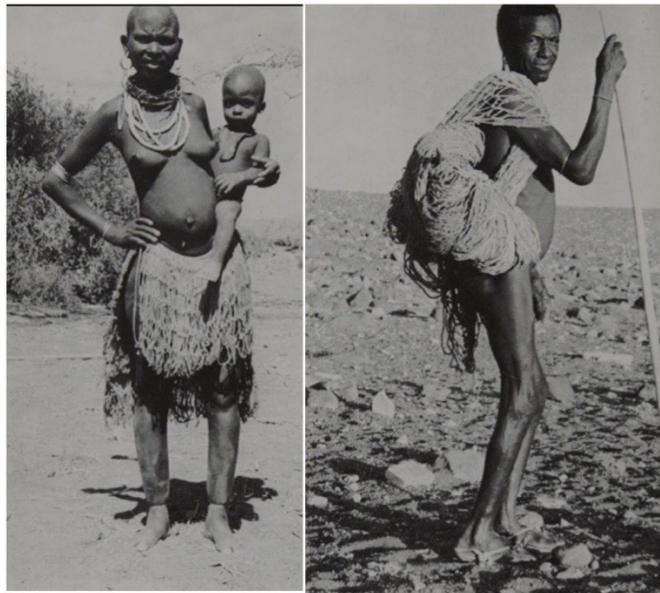
Dalton wrote for *The East African Annual*, a Kenyan magazine in colour with black-and-white sections, in 1951. The magazine was "apparently aimed at the European community: its content consisted mainly of a mixture of advertisements, tourist articles, and news and gossip in the changing pre-independence society" (Bristol Archives, 1953). The author insisted in his headline on "a dying tribe on the shores of Lake Rudolf," where he reported encountering "seventy members of the community." Once again, previously established stereotypes were emphasised with six ornamental photographs—intended as support for the article rather than scientific documentation—bearing a sociological style but little scientific rigour.

#### **4.9. Joy Adamson and death in the Elmolo**

Joy Adamson (1910-1980) was an Austrian artist and conservationist in Kenya. She wanted to "record traditional ornaments before they were discarded in favor of Western culture" (Adamson, 1967, p. 1). This is the idea of a disappearing Africa. She lived there from 1937 and travelled through the various communities of the country (Adamson, 1967, p. 15). In 1945 the colonial government commissioned her to make a complete record of the villages. She documented the Kenyan tribes with nearly seven hundred watercolours. Many can be seen in *Peoples of Kenya*. When she did not have time to paint, she took photographs to paint later.

Adamson's descriptions agree with most of the above, regarding their diet and health. She noted that "the Elmolo are the poorest of the poor, and it was shameful to accept the offer of all they possessed made with such disinterested kindness and without expecting any reward" (Adamson, 1967, p. 213). Her visual perspective brings four images about the community.

In the first edition of *Peoples of Kenya*, the layout confronted the image of an Elmolo woman and her baby with that of a fisherman. Both scenes are posed in a consensual, frontal manner: she with her child in her arms; he in his fishing attire (Figures 5 and 6). In the image of the middle-aged man, the lower limbs, arched due to rickets, are visible. In addition, the *kalate* over the ear represents him as a hippopotamus hunter. The visual emphasis falls on the net. These fishing nets come from the doum palm.

**Figure 5.** Elmolo woman and baby. **Figure 6.** Elmolo fisherman.

Source: Adamson, J. (1967). *Peoples of Kenya*. Collins & Harvill Press.

The third image shows a fisherman on his boat in intense backlight. The photo is underexposed and only the vertical silhouette of the man can be distinguished on the boat. It is a symbolic image of the culture, intended to reflect the main activity of the Elmolo, although with poor execution. The fourth photograph is one of the most innovative: it shows a stone burial. This description fits with the cemetery also documented by Fuchs in 1934, in the village of Komote<sup>3</sup>. The four scenes reinforce the roles and activities typical of life in this community: the woman as mother who takes care of the children; the man as producer and in charge of feeding the family, both on the log raft and the nets and skirts made from the doum palm, the basis for the survival of the Elmolo community (Amwatta, 2004). The fisherman on the logs appears as an iconographic repetition of the Elmolo culture after - at least - the Fuchs shooting in 1934 (Dyson & Fuchs, 1937).

#### **4.10. The John Hillaby Expedition. Time forgot to finish them off**

The London journalist John Hillaby wrote *Journey to the Jade Sea* (1964), in which he recounted his trip to Loiyangalani before Kenyan independence in December 1963. Hillaby documented his impressions of the Elmolo, providing an insight that, while it had no academic pretensions, would influence perceptions of this community with description again of the environment underscores and precariousness (Hillaby, 1964, p. 104). Although his account is not entirely negative, his remarks frame the Elmolo in an exotic perspective, emphasizing their apparent difference from the modern world.

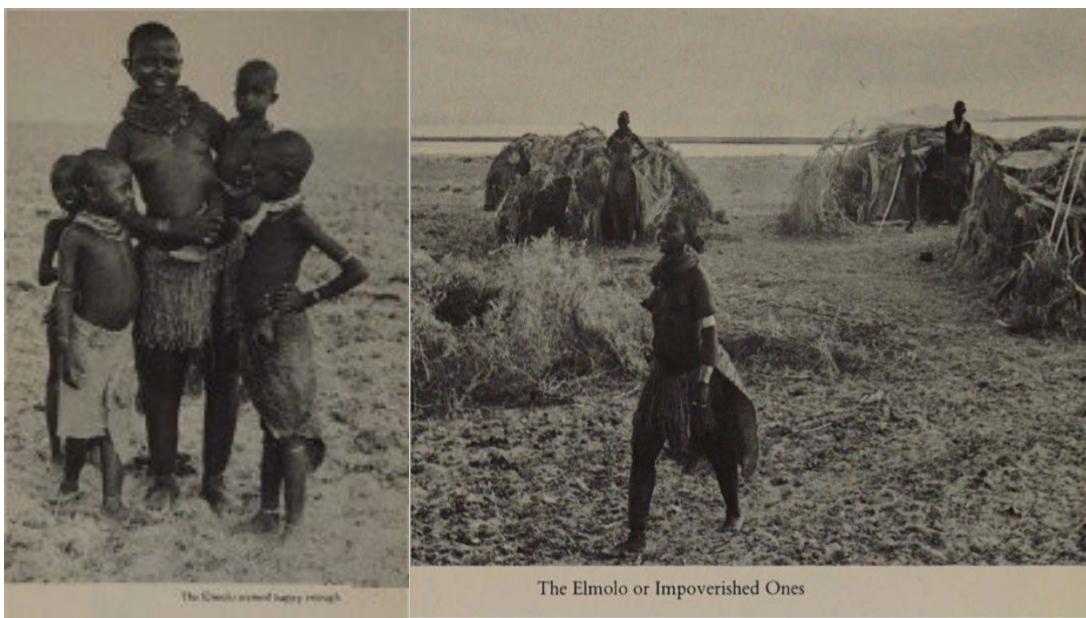
In his book Hillaby collects the testimony of an elder who, when asked what he feared most, replied: "the bad guys from the north", referring to the conflicts between the Elmolo and the Merille of Ethiopia. His narratives reinforce the image of a community in constant danger and accentuate a view of the Elmolo as victims. Another anecdote Hillaby describes is a ritual dance, in which "a frenzied horde of eighty Elmolo dancers at the height of ecstasy, grunted like animals and flailed wildly and erotically, until the weakest collapsed in a cataleptic trance." (Hillaby, 1964, p. 105). This is a hyperbolic and sensationalist interpretation of the dance, which was later contrasted by anthropologist Carole Scherrer, who explained these dances as part of a broader context of cultural expression.

Unlike the tone of his narrative, the photographs Hillaby included in his book offer a warmer, more human view of the Elmolo. He captured two images in Loiyangalani among the 22 total scenes in his work. In one, a smiling mother is shown surrounded by children, which contrasts with the harshness of his written descriptions (Figure 7). The second image portrays a young girl walking among the manyiatas, with a smile that defies the negative description in the caption (Figure 8). Although they may

<sup>3</sup> Both Adamson and Fuchs refer to the settlement of the Elmolo tombs at Komote, a settlement on an arm of land within Lake Rudolf, which forms a peninsula or Lorian Island when the height of the lake water rises, in an example similar to the abbey island of Saint Michael (France).

have originally served to reinforce certain stereotypes, since the 1990s, scholars have reconsidered their value as historical documents recording moments in the individual and collective lives of the Elmolo (Banks & Vokes, 2010).

**Figure 7.** "The Elmolo seemed happy enough". **Figure 8.** "The Elmolo or impoverished Ones".



Source: Adamson, J. (1967) *Peoples of Kenya*. Collins & Harvill Press.

In conclusion, Hillaby's work is a valuable testimony about the Elmolo, but his narrative reflects an ethnocentric perspective, with a condescending look that emphasizes their poverty and difference with the modern world. Nevertheless, his observations also reveal important aspects about the life and customs of the villagers, allowing to contrast them with later studies that seek to rescue their history from a more balanced perspective.

#### 4.11. Paul Spencer and the extinction of Vanishing Africa.

The British anthropologist Paul Spencer spent long periods in Kenya between 1957 and 1962. He wrote two ethnographies on the rituals of the Masai (Spencer, 1988) and the gerontocracy of the Samburu (Spencer, 2021). The long stay and the mastery of the Maa language marks the difference between Spencer and the rest of the previous expeditionaries. The latter often returned without real learning of the local language context and without enculturation outside the survival process of the caravan safari: "In examining their recent history, the accounts of the early travellers are misleading and contradictory" (Spencer & University of London, 1973, p. 1).

In 1958, Spencer visited the only two Elmolo settlements that survive today: one on the mainland and one on Lorian Island. He took a census of the population and found that, given their increase, this was not a dying tribe either in numbers or health. On this point, according to Spencer, and later Scherrer, there is no *Vanishing Africa* of the Elmolo, beyond the risk of extinction of their Cushitic language (Spencer & University of London, 1973, p. 2). The loss of the language arose because, as a result of drought conditions in mid-century, they had to move south to a settlement in the Loiyangalani oasis, in contact with Samburu and Rendille.

This new location eventually led to a cultural transfer from the Samburu and the Rendille (Spencer & University of London, 1973, p. 213), although important differences in their lifestyle remained: the Elmolo community is sedentary and engaged in fishing, while the other two peoples are nomadic and warriors. In fact, the major differences between the Elmolo people and these nomadic groups are the "customs associated with warfare. The Elmolo believe that they are defenseless against attack. Instead of killing another man, their traditional means of defense has been to flee to the island community." In contrast, for the Samburu and Rendille, "a man who kills an enemy brings honor to his family (Scherrer, 1978, p. 40).

Ultimately, the importance of Spencer's expedition lies in the identification of Elmolo cultural elements as opposed to "borrowings" or "cultural contaminations" from other tribes. This knowledge of

the cultural connections or disconnections of the Elmolo community with other peoples is essential to understanding their identity.

#### 4.12. *The Peter Beard & Alistair Graham Expedition. Half Art, Half Chronicle*

Painter Peter Beard accompanied journalist Alistair Graham in 1967 to document the large crocodile populations at Lake Rudolf. His images complement Graham's narrative (Graham & Beard, 1973), rather than stand alone.

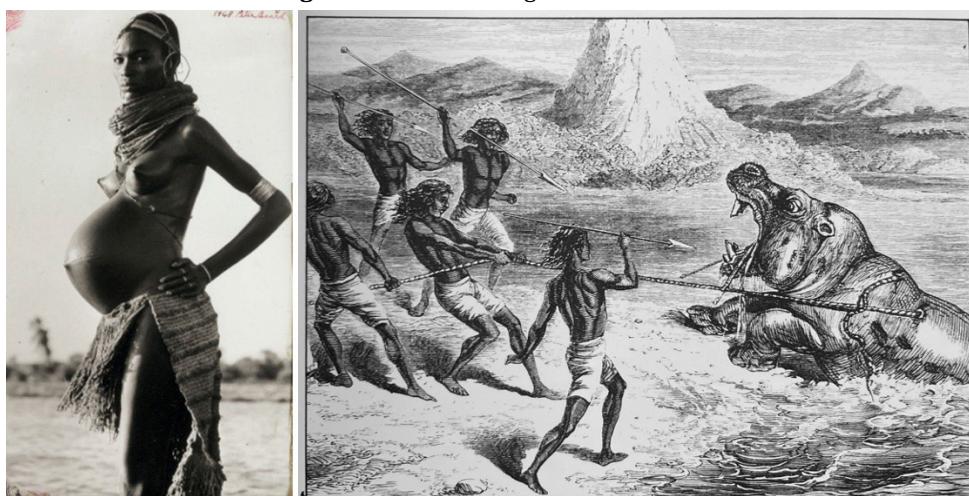
This work contains 220 photographs, 16 colour plates and 165 engravings chronicling the lake, focusing on the Turkana tribe. Graham's few references to the Elmolo highlight their poverty and disease, but also their character: "But beneath the cloak of misery is a friendly and agreeable people, who, unlike the Turkana, are perfectly at ease in and on the lake" (Graham & Beard, 1973, p. 163).

Beard's photographs portrayed the Elmolo tangentially, as his focus was on the Turkana. However, on his trip to Loiyangalani and Alia Bay, he captured eight images of the Elmolo. Women are seen almost as an extension of the African landscape: an element of nature, subject to the same forces as animals and the elements. At the same time, nature is intertwined with sensuality. This translates into photographs of women with semi-nude or nudged bodies, captured in spontaneous poses or during everyday activities. The image of the African woman is reiterated as a symbol of fertility and connection to the earth and as an object of desire related to exoticism (Figure 9).

In contrast, male figures, especially local hunters or fishermen, often appear in a context of action or defiance against the environment (Figure 10).

His pictures - analyzed as a block- acquire coherence and psychological depth, highlighting gazes and postures that empower the Elmolo female figure.

**Figures 9 and 10.** Images of the Elmolo.



Source: Graham, A., & Beard, P. (1973). *Eyelids of Morning: The Mingled Destinies of Crocodiles and Men*. New York Graphic Society.

#### 4.13. *Joann Carole Scherrer's expedition: Ten ethnographic months with the Elmolo.*

Carole Scherrer, an American anthropologist, lived ten months with this community from 1973, especially near the village of Loiyangalani. In his doctoral thesis she analyzed the social structure, way of life and adaptation of the Elmolo to a hostile environment. She documented external pressure to be assimilated with other ethnic group and adopt foreign customs. (Scherrer, 1978, p. 112).

In 1962 the Kenyan government had forced the Elmolo to abandon their settlements in Komote and Layeni Island. Some refused, but most settled in Waar, near Loiyangalani, where in 1965 the Catholic Consolata missionaries established a mission with an elementary school and a dispensary that transformed the educational life of the ethnic group (Scherrer, 1978, p. 141). Subsequently, the solar eclipse of June 1973 marked a westernization in the history of the Elmolo. Dozens of scientists, journalists and onlookers came to the region to observe the astronomical phenomenon. The community was abruptly exposed to modernity. She observed how the event intensified the curiosity of outsiders for the Elmolo, to the point of turning it into an object of media study (Scherrer, 1978, p. 135) and

generating tensions within the community. Some members were receptive to contact; others feared the loss of their cultural identity.

Between 1940 and 1980 other ethnic groups in Kenya had been photographically documented, such as the Masai or Samburus with Joy Adamson or the Italian-Kenyan Mirella Ricciardi with her work *Vanishing Africa* (1971), who - unlike Adamson - did not contact the Elmolo community. Tribes from other African countries were also portrayed. The results were publications such as *Pygmeen* (Julien, 1953) on the Cameroon-Uganda axis; or the exoticism of Sudan with *Le Village des Nubas* (Rodger, 1955); *The last of the Nuba* (Riefenstahl, 1974), etc. In short, the Elmolo were a people and a culture that in the 1970s were considered doomed to disappear.

At that time in 1970, Scherrer found the social organization and division of labor around sex and age. Its main functions are to subsist in a hostile ecology (Scherrer, 1978, p. 136). Education prepares for life and survival. The Elmolo culture is governed by the *Ubuntu* identity principle, cooperation with others and responsibility for common good. Collective property rights are regulated for fishing and gathering, types of animals, hunting methods and tools (Scherrer, 1978, p. 80), specially for the crocodile and hippo hunting.

The conclusion of Scherrer's thesis on the Elmolo is harsh: they are a people who live in such a way because they cannot aspire to any alternative. Against this realism of Carole Scherrer - of "this valley of death on the lake" in the words of Höhnel (1894, p. 100) the photojournalist Mohamed Amin will offer a hopeful vision of the ethnic group for his book *Cradle of Mankind* (1981): the image of a proud people as crocodile and hippo hunters that - in spite of the poverty attributed to them - no other community is capable of realizing in the lake Turkana.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

In relation to the General Objective, it can be concluded that textual and visual mentions of the Elmolo people created and consolidated concepts such as poverty, *ndorobo*, language isolation, shyness and hospitality, ritualistic hippo hunting, and relationships with other communities. Some of these concepts were forged over time and were repeated among the explorers in the tribe's grand narrative. A special case is the stereotype of *Vanishing Africa*, accompanied by a photographic aesthetic of poverty and disease, which reinforced the notion of a disappearing ethnic group. Spencer, Scherrer and Sobania (Sobania, 1988) denied later this idea and the negative narrative stereotype. At the same time Mohamed Amin will offer a photographic portfolio of hope, prior to the disappearance of the original Elmolo culture in 1976 (Martínez-Sánchez & Antona-Jimeno, 2023).

On the other hand, the evolution of the visual representations on the Elmolo reflects the passage from illustrations published in books and articles to printed photographs, due to the technological advance and the lowering of publishing costs (Koivunen, 2008; Lewis, 2017; Riego, 2001). Until 1935 there was only visual record of Elmolo people in generic illustrations in the memoirs of the Teleki expedition in 1888. Fuchs was the first of all the expeditionaries to exhibit the first public photographs of the ethnic group in 1937 (Dyson & Fuchs, 1937).

Even so, the corpus of images located of the Elmolo - barely twenty - is small if one considers that they correspond to a total of 24 different expeditions. In addition, the summary is that, first, there is no photographic documentary depth in quantity and quality. Secondly, most of this meagre collection is made up of photographs with an ethnographic mission, that of Fuchs. Thirdly, they repeat visual stereotypes of the Elmolo people. Finally, except for those of the journalist Hillaby and Beard, there is hardly any psychological analysis. Hence, EO1 is answered.

Narratives about the Elmolo were ahead of the images, both in depth and breadth, for almost a century covered by this study. Perhaps for this reason, the text of the explorers' advances knowledge about the tribe, while the images of the community seem frozen in time, in simple (or stereotyped) scenes. It should be emphasized, however, that photography in these trips was always used as a simple support. It was never an end. They were images to intended to illustrate a text.

Concerning EO2, the analysis shows that the objective of each of the expeditionaries was to explore the unexplored in northeastern Africa. They effectively opened African roads impassable to western man. And in this task, they were not always accurate, particularly in their first attempts. In fact, when studying the different routes they travelled, one can appreciate the circuitous nature of their journeys. In fact, most of the published diaries and travel books of the explorers include appendices and maps.

At the same time, not all explorers had direct and in-depth encounters with the Elmolo. (For example, Stigand (1910, p. 192) attributes the name “community of the outcasts” to the Elmolo... without having been able to communicate with them). In addition, many of the early explorers were limited by their lack of knowledge of the language for talking with the Elmolo people, relying on local translators who were unfamiliar with the language but who provided inaccurate information that was then recorded in books. Ultimately, the dominant narrative was sometimes constructed on preconceived ideas or ideas provided by previous expeditionaries without accurate confirmation.

In summary, the views of expeditionaries -anthropologists and artists, the three types of Westerners who approached the Elmolo - were very different but coincided in part. Almost all of them were somewhat scientific. Another thing was the methods they applied to achieve their goals. To the extent that the Elmolo as a specific culture and people constituted the center of attention, the anthropologists, logically, were the ones who provided the most precise and detailed information about their culture and organization. The artists, in this particular case, were in an intermediate position. Perhaps in an effort to ensure that their images (paintings or photographs) accumulated the greatest number of features and objects characteristic of that culture. This underlined their exemplary and consequently less real character, because -for example- on almost no occasion does a woman wear all the beads available for a ritual or festive event; a photo that collects them all in a pose speaks more of the photographer's interest in documentation than of the realism of the normality of life of the person portrayed. There is also a necessary consideration: once the lake and its region were discovered, progress was made from the generic to the concrete; from the external to the internal. There was an effective deepening and progress in the exploratory spiral.

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