

# John Kenny

## Sub-Saharan Journeys



*A freelance photographer based in London, John Kenny has spent a substantial part of the last decade traversing some of the more obscure regions of Africa capturing remarkable portraits of people still living traditional lifeways there. Taken with a digital SLR and an eight-by-ten view camera, his haunting portraits are gripping documents that remarkably fall into a unique humanist place somewhere between Victorian ethnographic documentation and contemporary fashion photography. We chatted with John about his work.*

**Tribal Art:** *What is the scope of this project?*

**John Kenny:** It started in 2006 and it has taken me across twelve sub-Saharan African countries and into hundreds of indigenous tribal communities.

**TA:** *How would you characterize your experience with the people you've met?*

**JK:** These visits have been an amazing education for me. I've met some remarkable people and have also been privileged to witness unique tribal crafts and visual expressions of culture found in how people from these communities choose their attire. And as much as there are similarities between members of the same tribe, there are very often interesting differences. Within a set of visual "cultural rules," some of which might communicate key pieces of societal status about a person, each individual might well have a degree of freedom: choice perhaps to select their own fabrics, jewelry, body art, or hairstyles. This individual interpretation of what their culture means to them is something that excites me and has led me in many cases to revisit communities some years down the line. And

FIG. 1 (right): Close to Bargi, Omo Valley, Ethiopia. August 2012.  
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perhaps more importantly, I've made many good friends amongst these communities and so I'm often driven to return to revitalize those friendships, perhaps to share pictures from my last visit and understand what life has brought for them and their families in the intervening period.

**TA:** *What are you trying to achieve with this project?*

**JK:** As a photographer I want my pictures to communicate to people back home some intimate feel for what it is to be in the presence of some of these visually spectacular individuals. In addition to this, the photo narratives that I write in my shows aim to provide context and an outline of some of the issues that indigenous tribal communities face today. I remain fascinated by how traditional communities manage to survive in some of the most inhospitable environments on earth and amongst today's myriad political, developmental, and environmental pressures.

**TA:** *Why just Africa?*

**JK:** From the very first time I landed in Africa to start this work, I found Africans to be generous spirited, hugely optimistic, and welcoming. They unwittingly ensured that I developed a profound love for the continent and explain why I return there and not to other destinations that have rich indigenous tribal heritages.

**TA:** *Talk to us about your photographic style.*

**JK:** At the very start of my Africa project, after my first encounters with indigenous tribal communities, I was left mesmerized by what I had witnessed. I was hugely excited by the idea of making art within these communities, but also knew that it would be a massive

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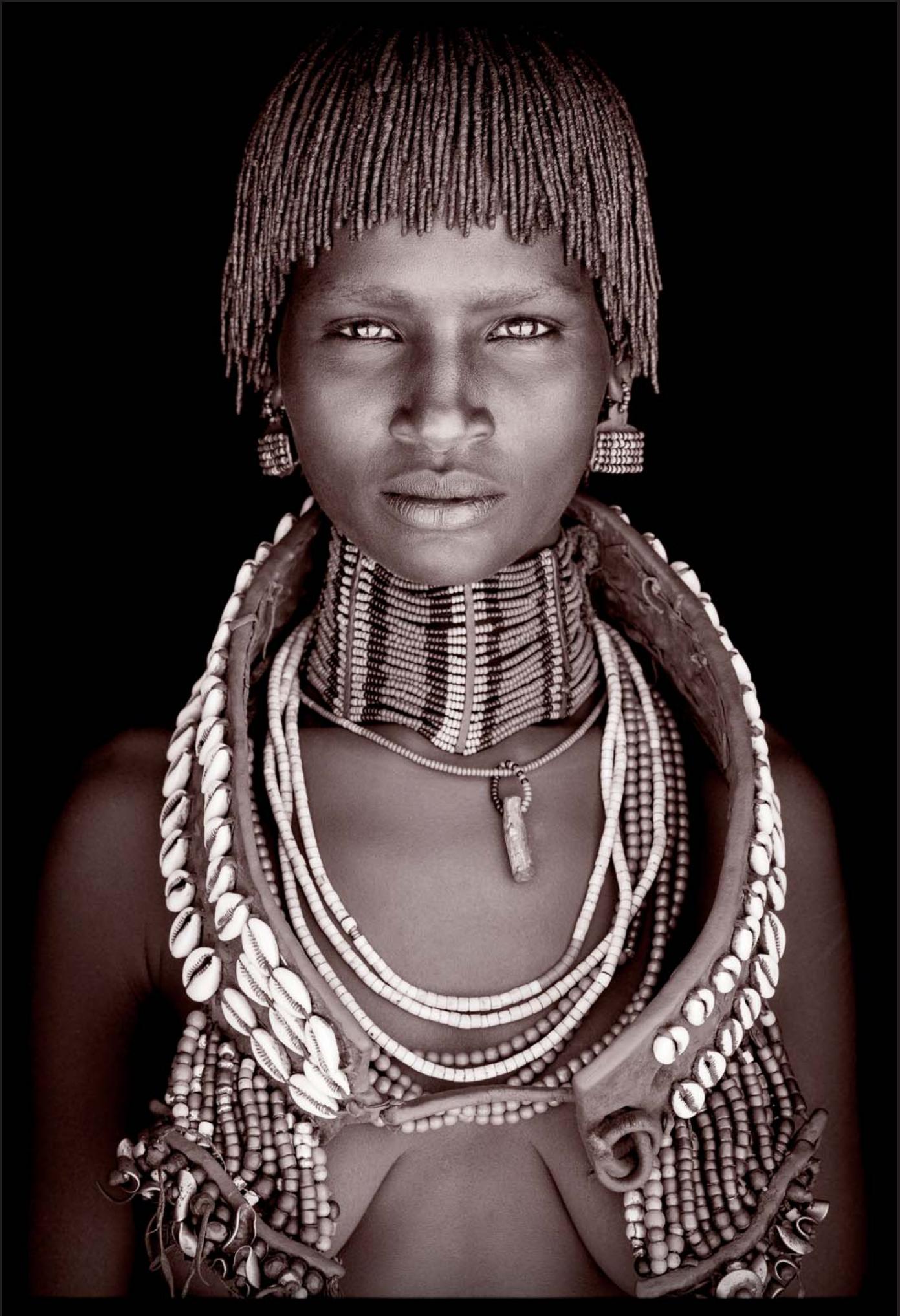
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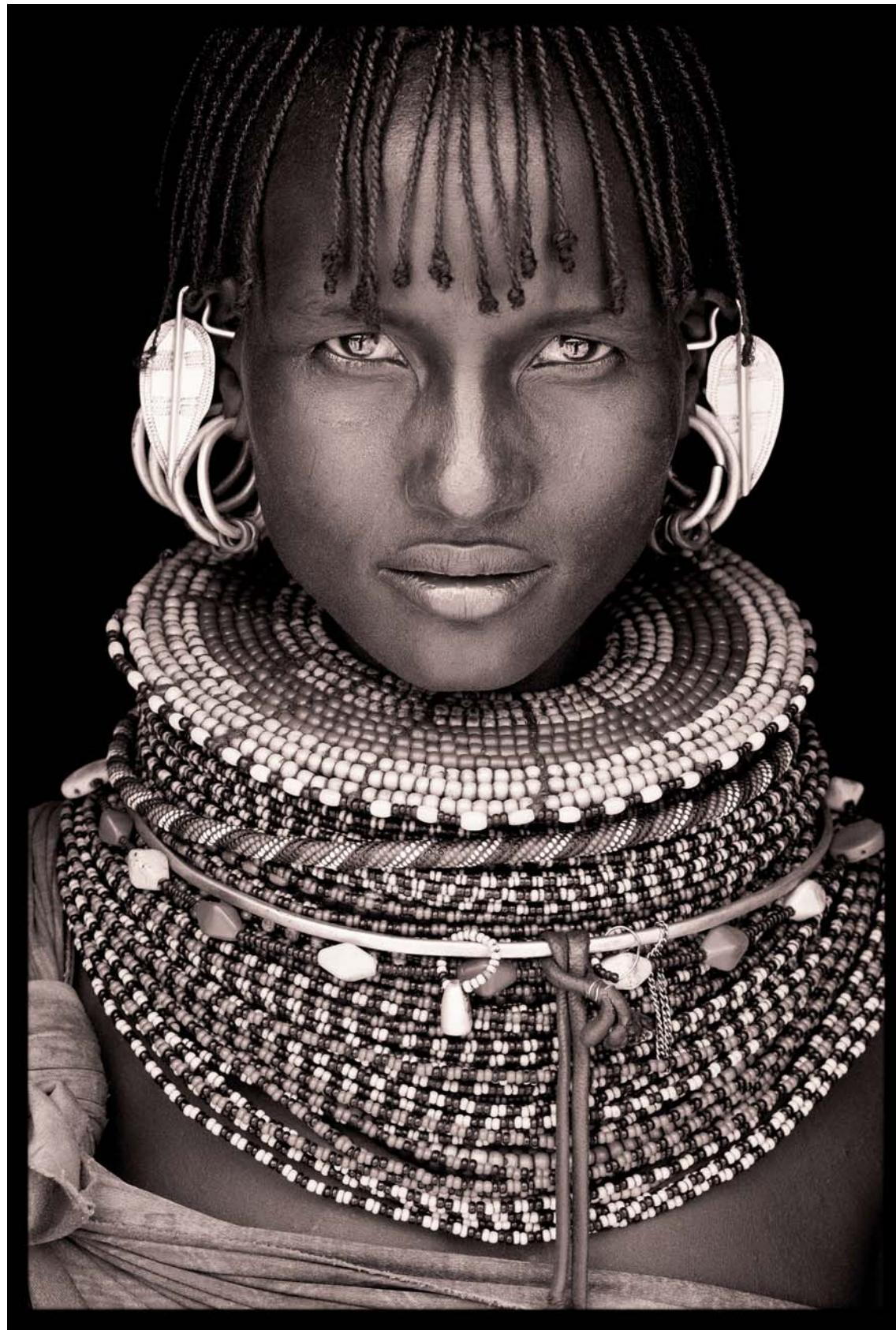


FIG. 2: Married Turkana girl, Baragoi, northern Kenya. April 2009.

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FIG. 3: Mynga, Mumuhuila people, Angola. August 2012.

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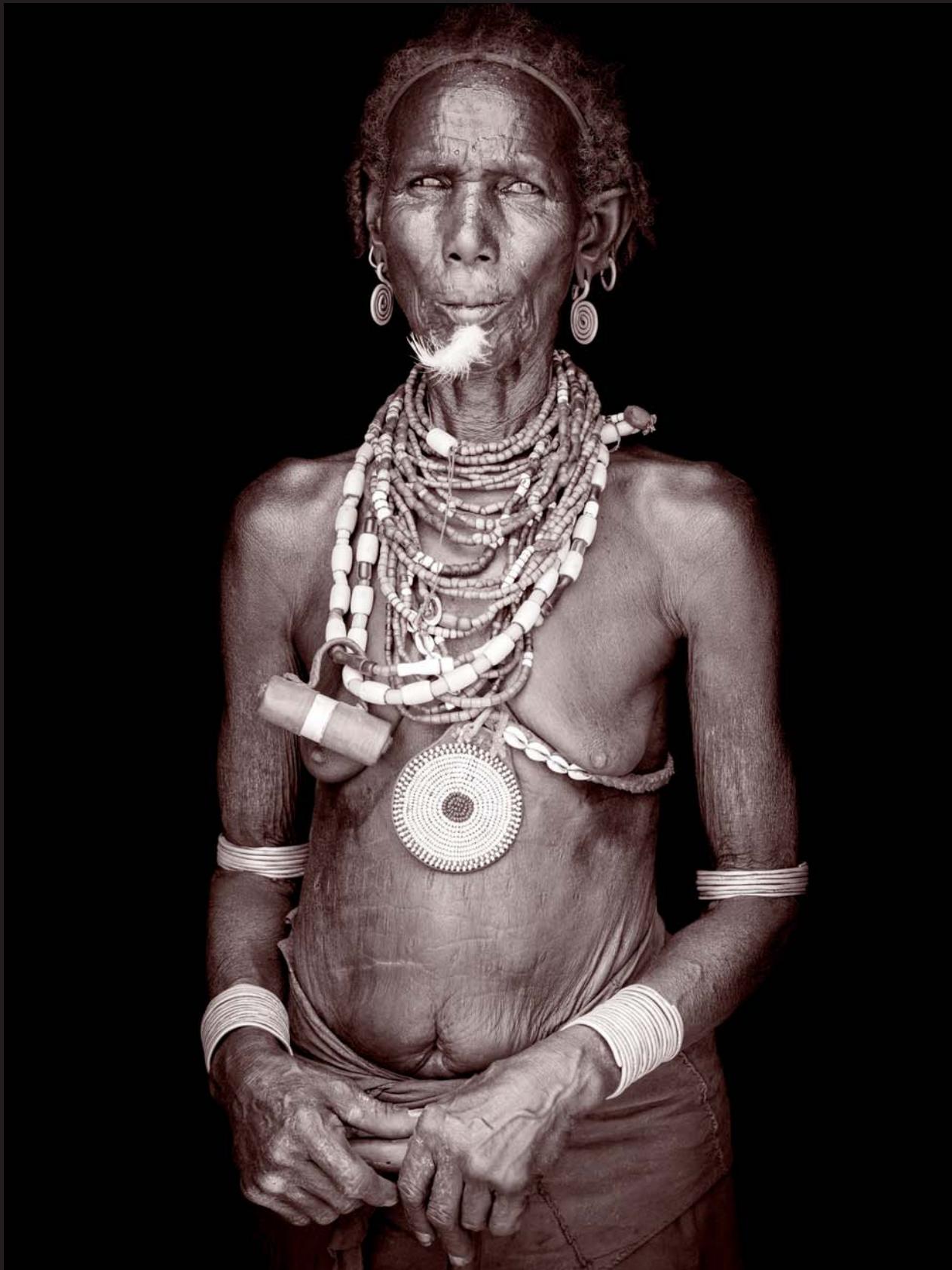


FIG. 4: Torzo, Dassanech people, Ethiopia. August 2012.

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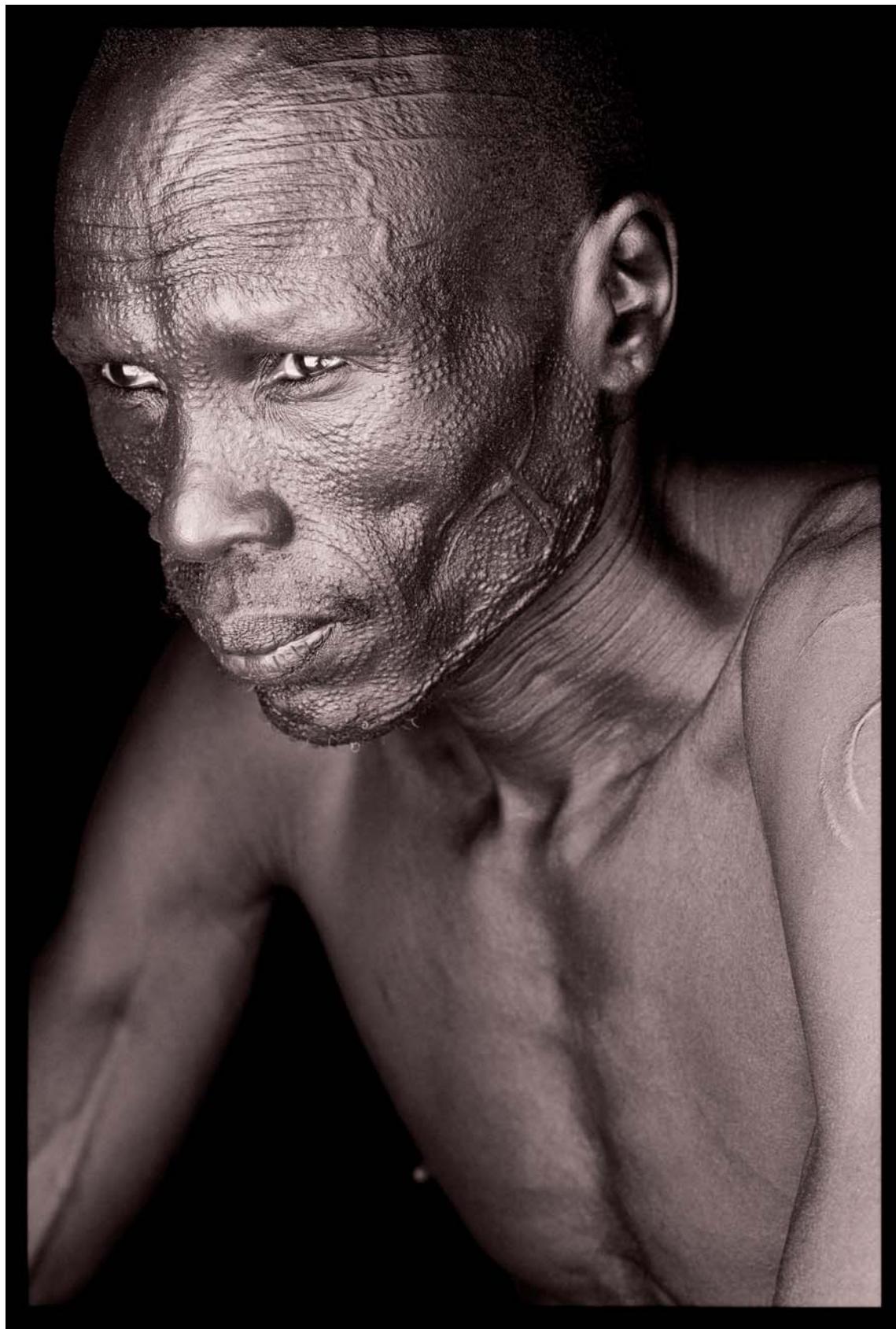


FIG. 5: Nuer refugee, Ethiopia/Sudan border. January 2010.

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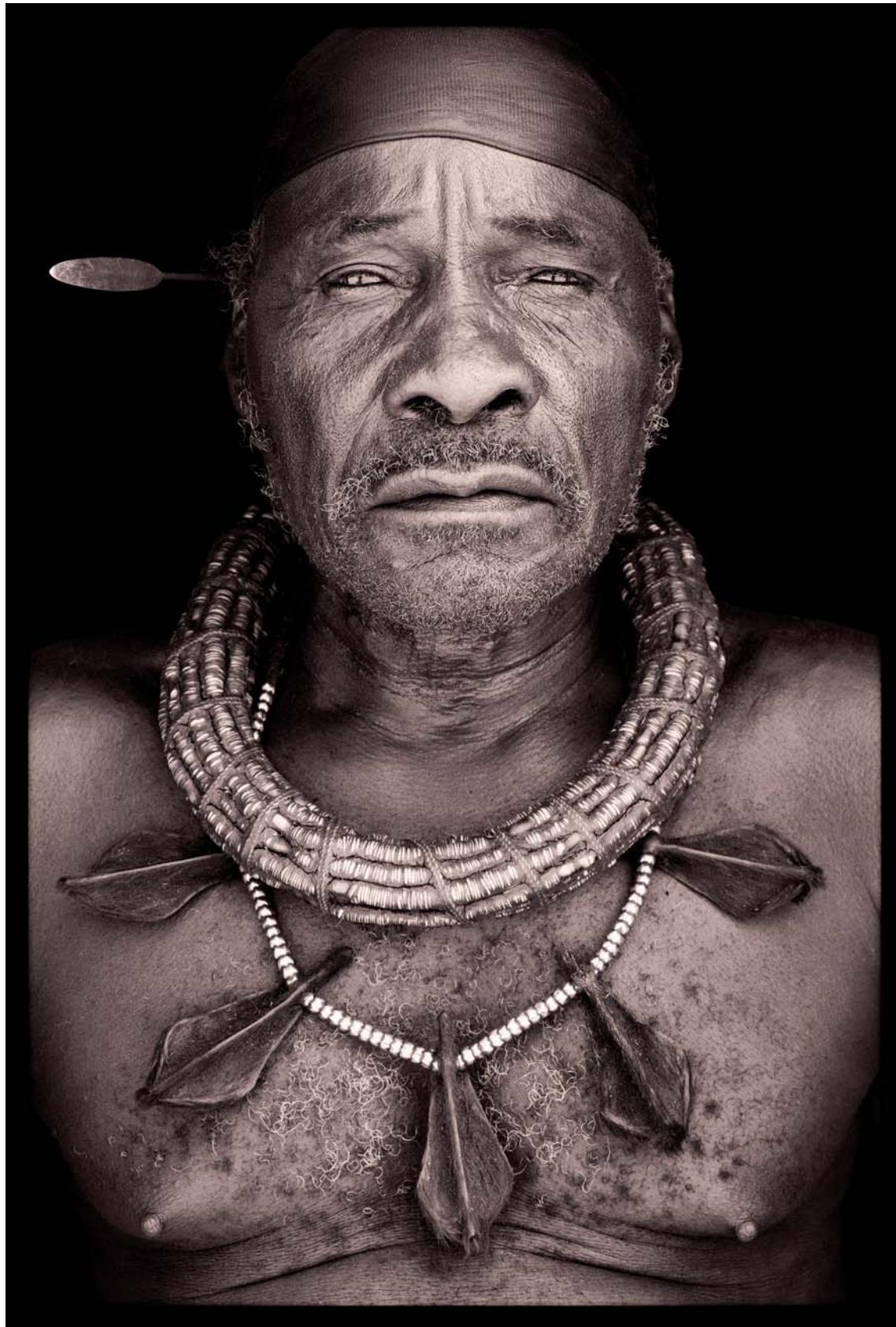


FIG. 6: Himba elder at a funeral in Kaokoland, Namibia. October 2009.

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challenge to translate the beauty and piercing intensity of such people into a photograph. I'd seen a lot of unremarkable portraits taken in traditional communities that demonstrated to me that strong subject matter alone doesn't make for a compelling piece of art.

The style of my photographs was a response to this problem and also reflects an aesthetic that I personally enjoy: black-and-white imagery that can express a degree of timelessness and drama. It is influenced by the use of light, dark, and dramatic contrasts that I had seen in the work of chiaroscuro (an Italian term which literally means light-dark) artists such as Rembrandt.

I felt that to be successful in my aims, my portraits would need to abstract the "remarkable" (the people in my pictures) from the "not so remarkable" (the often dull, dusty, barren backgrounds of their arid communities). I also resolved to use the conditions and materials that I had available to me in remote African villages to create these portraits: This was sunlight (i.e., not artificial light) and a hut, usually borrowed from a villager, as my "studio." So I started experimenting with these simple "ingredients" in a Kenyan Maasai *manyatta* (camp) in 2006 until I found the look that I was after.

The blackness, or negative space, around the subject and absence of any distraction is meant to provide a feeling of

real proximity to the subject when you look at the prints. For me this is one of the key ways to let the subject's likeness—and the less tangible "aura" that I feel when meeting in person—to come across undiminished in the portrait. Also, shooting just inside a hut prevents any direct sunlight coming onto the person and so all light on the subject is reflected from the outside. It gives a beautifully soft illumination of the subject without using flash or reflectors. It has, however, taken a lot of practice: You need a lot of patience for this approach and a prayer for sunny days!

**TA:** *What's coming up for all this?*

**JK:** The project is an ongoing one for me and I'm sure that I will be returning to Africa some time over the next six to twelve months. To where I'm not sure—I have wanted to go to the far north of Nigeria and Cameroon for a while, but security issues suggest that now might not be the right time for this trip. I had a six-week project in Angola and Ethiopia last summer, which will be the subject of a solo show in London with my gallery in spring 2013.

When I started this project in 2006 I had a goal of publishing a book at some point. It's taken a lot of work, but I'm happy to say that I'm working with Merrell Publishers in the UK to release a book of my work in the fall of 2013 called *African Beauty*.



FIG. 7: Muhacaona mother and child, Angola. August 2012.

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