

Apogee Photo Magazine



Millennium Promise

by Lyle Owerko

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Monica, one of the patrons of the community and a member of the governing committee of Sauri.

In the fall of 2006, I donated my time as a photographer and cinematographer to the Millennium Promise, an organization that works to eliminate extreme poverty. I had agreed to work on a short film that documented the village of Sauri, Kenya. The goal was to capture the daily lives and dignity of the local people as they met the challenges of extreme poverty and sustained the will to overcome the abject nature of their existence. While there, I was able to see progress and a rise in the human condition. After the filming wrapped, I made a personal choice to stay to capture more about the lives of these amazing and stoic people in photographic stills.

As a photographer, I was pursuing the concept of simple black-and-white portraits against a white background. While I had been acting as the cinematographer of the film about the first Millennium Promise village, I had built a daylight studio in the town of Sauri to filter and control the light during the

interviews. The studio also worked as a place to isolate the interviewees, so the director could conduct a conversation with them that brought out their personalities. The idea of using a backdrop came from the works of a long history of photographic greats--including Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, and Edward Curtis. They were the pinnacle achievers and innovators who developed the technique of isolating indigenous subjects against a backdrop. However, it's an idea that isn't as easily achieved as it is conceived.

Each photographer has his own twist on the method, and I soon found a voice that suited the point of view I had inside my head. My being on a new technical tangent helped. It was the first time I had worked in Africa with digital camera gear. I had my Canon 5D and my 17" Powerbook G4--neither the most

powerful of gear nor the current technical heavyweight in the field, but certainly what I would need to get started. (I've since graduated to a 1Ds MkII.) I was able to shoot during the day and load and convert at night. The software I used was Capture One Pro for importing the RAW files and exporting to Photoshop for final conversion. Matched together in the field, I developed a "look" that rivaled my previous achievements on a Mamiya 7 or my Toyo 4x5. I couldn't believe the quality and the depth in the images. I also was astounded by the sharpness and latitude of the look. Prints from the series easily blow up to 44" x 70" without any quality left behind.



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Issac is one of the local elders and Uncle to the local chief of Sauri.



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A member of the youth committee.

The idea within this project grew out of a goal to render the people of Sauri real and unforgettable through sheer focus and scale--to communicate the history of their lives in the details of their faces and to capture their character through an engaging dialogue with the camera. It was an absolute joy to work with and to be surrounded by people who wanted to be documented. They understood the importance of having their pictures taken. A chronicle of their life was being captured.

The images could be used as messages to the world about their existence and could serve to preserve memories for their offspring. A number of aid groups go into the field and commission images that show the dour state of things. They think this drama drives donor empathy and is a necessary part of their communication message. My point of view is that it's as important to show the joys as it is to show the tears. Compassion is the



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This is an elderly couple discovered on the outskirts of the Sauri community. The old man is blind, so we bought him a radio to keep him company. He died about two months after this picture was taken. They were extremely poor and had been living off of pumpkin leaves, while selling off their crops and vegetables for money in order to survive.

ambassador of the Earth, and images that convey compassion and dignity are universal--no matter how hard the circumstances. The goal behind the method and the art of the project was to create a timeless and universal body of work. The series has become very much a part of me--beyond the technical, more a part of the ether of my creative existence. Every day I'm not contributing to this project, I feel like I'm letting precious time slip by.

What did I see while I was working on the project? Part of spending any large amount of time in Africa is to be very near the razor's edge between life and death. Mortalities are high; many people have come and gone in the short spans of time between my three trips to Kenya in the last fourteen months. Many of the older people I've documented have passed away. The extreme cycle of life does not touch our modern world in the same way, nor does the hard labor or chores common in domesticated poverty.

In Kenya, as well as through a lot of rural Africa, work begins when dawn breaks. The young children are usually the ones who are sent to fetch water. The meal preparations for a family's daily sustenance (which for most Africans is meager, at best) are made by the women of the house as well as by the eldest of the girls in the family. A meal of maize is typical in the mornings, in addition to strongly flavored and usually sugary tea, which is considered an essential start to the day.

The living conditions are very basic.

Homes are nothing more than meager mud shacks. They are built utilizing a stick-and-log framework with mud, straw, and sometimes dung mixed together to form a sort of earth-crete adhesive material. The roofs are thatched leaves formed over wood beams (luxury is having a corrugated tin roof). Windows might have wooden shades but no glass at all. Cooking is done in a section of the house where an open fire burns. Sometimes, there are separate cooking quarters, often a very smoky affair. Many people suffer

respiratory problems due to the cooking fires in the home.

During the day, the men tend the land and take care of the cattle and crops. The family members help where needed. It's common to see very young boys tending the livestock and groups of pre-teens assisting in the fields. The women take care of the children through the day and prepare the home for the evening meal.

The women definitely run the household and the care of the babies. When darkness falls, most people retire to bed. Generally, most human life in Sauri follows the circadian rhythm of the Earth, patterned after the rise and set of the sun.

In the village of Sauri, where I took these portraits, on weekdays the morning roads are populated with children in school uniforms marching to class. The Headmaster at the Sauri primary school, in his indomitable presence and voice, told us of the success that the Millennium Promise school lunch program had brought to his charges. Prior to the

lunchtime feeding program, the school had rated near the lowest in the district.

The Headmaster knew his students were smart. That was not the problem. But how could you concentrate and excel when you were hungry? After Millennium Villages project introduced the school lunch program, the students grades soared. Out of the district's 385 primary schools, Bar Sauri Primary School is now one of the top academic performers--having jumped from 195th just a few years ago to consistently ranking within the top 10. The smile on the principal's face was beyond compare. The pride he showed and the genuine peace he felt, knowing his children could be taught to learn and achieve an education, is a memory I will hold for life.



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A young boy is photographed on the outskirts of Sauri. He tends crops and animals rather than attending school. The fact the he is not going to school is either due to poverty or the necessity to help his family.



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Sauri Primary student

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Sauri Primary student

I saw and heard many good things--of crop production that soared and of a community cereal bank designed to store the extra produce to allow the members of the co-op to collectively bargain for at-market rates for their maize and other products with the agricultural dealers. This co-operation succeeded in putting more money into local pockets than ever before. Through science, crop rotation, and proper fertilizers, new life was springing forth. Millennium Promise Villages Project is essentially a technology--a fundamental human-to-human exchange of knowledge and material wisdom that, when implemented into a community, allows a wellspring of activity to supersede the battles and difficulties on the path

out of extreme poverty.

Other positive hopes that I was able to document included the clinic where people could be treated for basic illnesses. One day, I followed a young mother through the process of having her young baby diagnosed with malaria. I also traveled with an elderly woman in the community truck/ambulance to a local hospital as she gasped through her last hours of life. But with the passing of one life, there springs joy in another. Seeing the children shining in the classrooms, studying for a new future, and the youths of the village plotting to start a magazine (that they hope is on the newsstands in New York one day) is thinking really big and bright. From rural Kenya to New York is ambition for sure.



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Young mother, Sauri, Kenya

I miss Africa because I'm not able to play soccer with the kids every day. That's the most sporting fun I've had in years. Most importantly, it's the ability to make an honest connection with another human being every day that I, as a photographer, miss the most. I'll be back in Africa soon. The goal is to expand this series beyond Kenya and through the Millennium Promise network and craft it into a book. I'll keep Apogee posted and appreciate the focus and time that the magazine has given this body of work. The people of Sauri, the People of Kenya, and the people throughout Africa will greatly appreciate being noticed and, more importantly, being empowered to share their character and dignity as they strive forward to a more vibrant and prosperous future.

The mission of Millennium Promise is to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) - eight globally endorsed objectives that address the many aspects of extreme poverty - in Africa by 2015. To that end, Millennium Promise works with impoverished communities, national and local governments, and partner organizations to implement high-impact programs aimed at transforming lives on the continent and engaging donor nations, corporations, and the general public in the effort. Our work is premised on the belief that, for the first time in history, our generation has the opportunity to end extreme poverty, hunger, and disease.

Our flagship initiative, the Millennium Villages, now operating in 80 villages across 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, takes a comprehensive approach to addressing extreme poverty. By combining the best scientific and local knowledge, Millennium Villages address all the major problems simultaneously -- hunger, disease, inadequate education, lack of safe drinking water, and absence of essential infrastructure -- to assist communities on their way to self-sustainable development.

www.millenniumpromise.org

Lyle Owerko is a New York City-based photographer and director whose photographs have made appearances in places such as the remake of the "The

Omen" (2006) and Jonathan Safran Foer's novel "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close", as well as on MTV and publications such as Tokion, Nylon, Blackbook and Planet Magazine. He is probably best known for the photograph that appeared on the cover of TIME Magazine, of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001 (which was recently ranked by the American Society of Magazine Editors as one of the 40 most important magazine covers in the last 40 years. Current work includes two book projects and the organization of a touring exhibition of his African portraiture imagery.

Be sure to visit Lyle's web site at www.owerko.com.

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