

Art of Africa

Flash is a wonderful tool, but it seemed too bold for **John Kenny's** intimate portraits of semi-nomadic people living in sub-Saharan Africa. He tells **Jeff Meyer** how he simplified his setup to use only light reflected off the ground to illuminate his subjects

Subtle lighting reflected off the ground at midday helps John capture the decorative textures on his subject's skin



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A MAN walks into the room out of the beating sun, which is rare for a late summer's day in Britain, carrying a large bike and a bag. He sets them down beneath a large print of a young woman named Ancho who is grinning for the camera. It seems like a lot to bring to an exhibition at a small photo gallery in London's Covent Garden, but then the man comes over and introduces himself as John Kenny, the photographer behind the images. He's just rushed over from his day job to explain the DIY methods and ethos behind the project that has consumed him for the past four years.

In 2006, just three years after he picked up a camera, John set off for a tour of Africa

with nothing more than an enthusiast-level DSLR, a handful of prime lenses, a tripod and a rucksack. His trip took him through the heart of sub-Saharan Africa, where he was awed by the vibrant culture and traditional ways of life of the semi-nomadic people living in its remote outposts.

'I thought I knew a lot about Africa before I left, but what I realised when I was there is that I was familiar with the way it is portrayed in the media,' John says. 'Most of our impressions of Africa come from negative portrayals of the continent through the news. And while these well-known problems do exist, there seems to be a mismatch or an incorrect balance of images of life on the

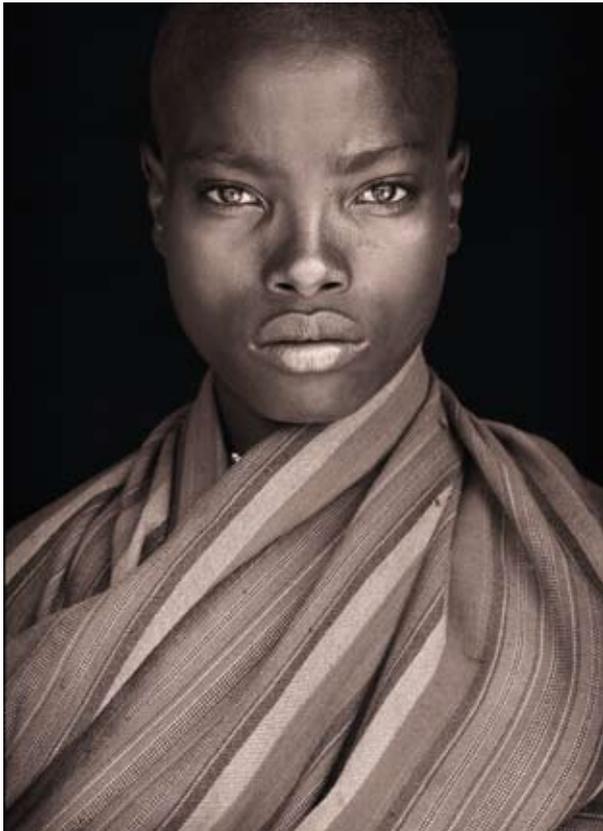
Tired of seeing images of forlorn tribesmen, John wanted his subjects' pride and personality to come through in his images

continent. While careful not to romanticise any notions, my trip motivated me to capture the personalities of the people there and show them in a proud way that you don't often get to see.'

During this trip, John experimented with different ways of capturing the people he met that didn't fall into the stereotypes of forlorn-looking villagers standing amid tattered buildings. 'The people I met were very happy, proud people,' he recalls.

After much thought, John realised that to get viewers to focus solely on the people he needed to cut out their environmental context entirely.

'I still have questions about whether you



typically designed very narrow and densely built helps his search, and in this part of Africa one can always count on there being plenty of sun.

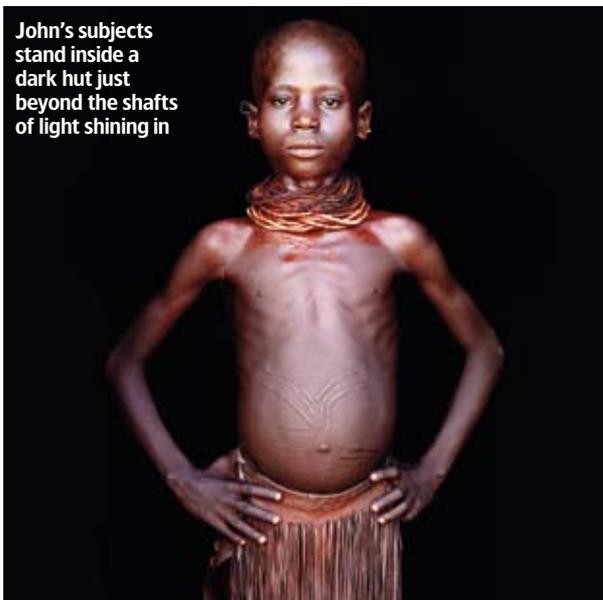
When the conditions are right, John asks his subject to stand inside the hut, just beyond the edge of the shafts of light shining through. With the subject facing the doorway, John uses the light reflecting off the ground back up onto the subject's face. With his Canon EOS 5D mounted on a tripod that's positioned just outside the hut, he meters from the middle greys of the skin tones and takes a shot at a slow shutter speed, which results in the subtle, silvery tones in his portraits. Sometimes the bright jewellery and white sea shells worn by some groups of people make it difficult to meter for the skin tones, but shooting raw files gives John a little more latitude to bring back some detail in his post-processing.

'I always try to shoot in the brightest conditions that I can, which goes against most of the rules for natural light photographers,' says John. 'It would be

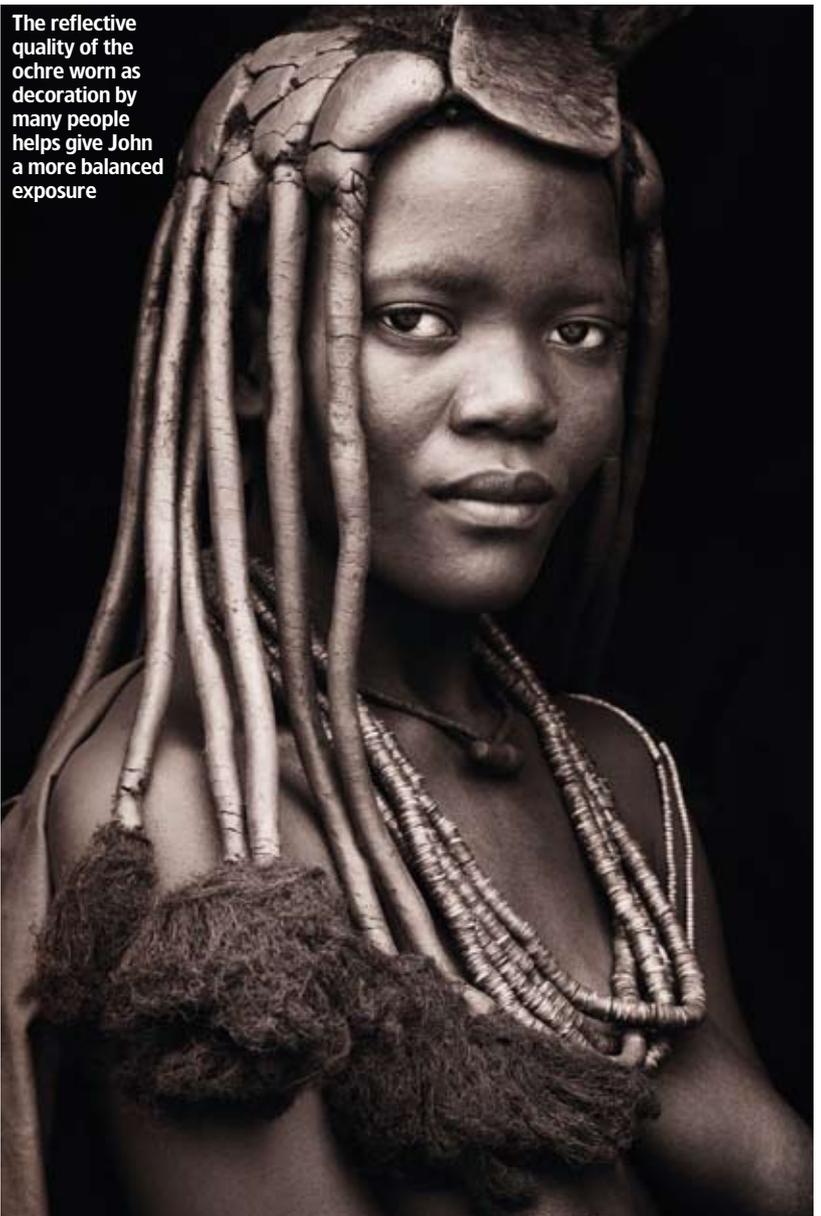
difficult for me to make pictures like this in the UK, with its overcast skies. As far as I'm concerned, the brighter the better.

'That said, because I'm mostly a black & white photographer, I'm not really drawn to high-contrast scenes. It was really while searching for these tones that I came across this method of using the darkness just beyond strong light,' he adds. 'Flash never appealed to me. I didn't think it was the right tool for what I was doing. It seemed too complex a way to get the illumination that I wanted. The sun is usually right overhead in that part of Africa, so I suspected there was enough light, and I also knew that I had to compose with as few distractions as possible. Utilising the darkness inside the huts therefore became the way that I thought I'd be able to do this and get the effect of subtle lighting with maximum detail.'

John realised he had stumbled on to something special back in 2006 when he photographed a young woman named Ancho, whose iconic pose and well-lit features could have rivalled



John's subjects stand inside a dark hut just beyond the shafts of light shining in



The reflective quality of the ochre worn as decoration by many people helps give John a more balanced exposure

lose too much of the context of the person and where he or she lives by making the background all black, but ultimately I like eliminating all background detail because I want to focus on the intimacy of the person rather than their surroundings,' he says.

At first glance, you would think that John uses flash, or even reflectors, to get the effect of a darkened background behind a well-lit subject, but his method is much more rudimentary. He spends time walking around a settlement inspecting the huts, looking for one that is lightproof on the inside, but has a doorway facing into the sun and yet with a floor that isn't lit too much. The fact that these huts are

Top: One of John's best-selling prints, this Samburu shepherd is actually a young boy, which he says has confounded many viewers

any studio portrait by the top fashion photographers (see below opposite). It was this photograph that motivated John to make four subsequent trips to Africa, photographing for a total of 12–13 months.

'The technique gets more refined each time,' he says. 'Before the second trip in December 2008, I'd been working in my IT job for a while and had sort of worked out the technique in my head during that intermediate period of not photographing, and it felt more natural the second time around.'

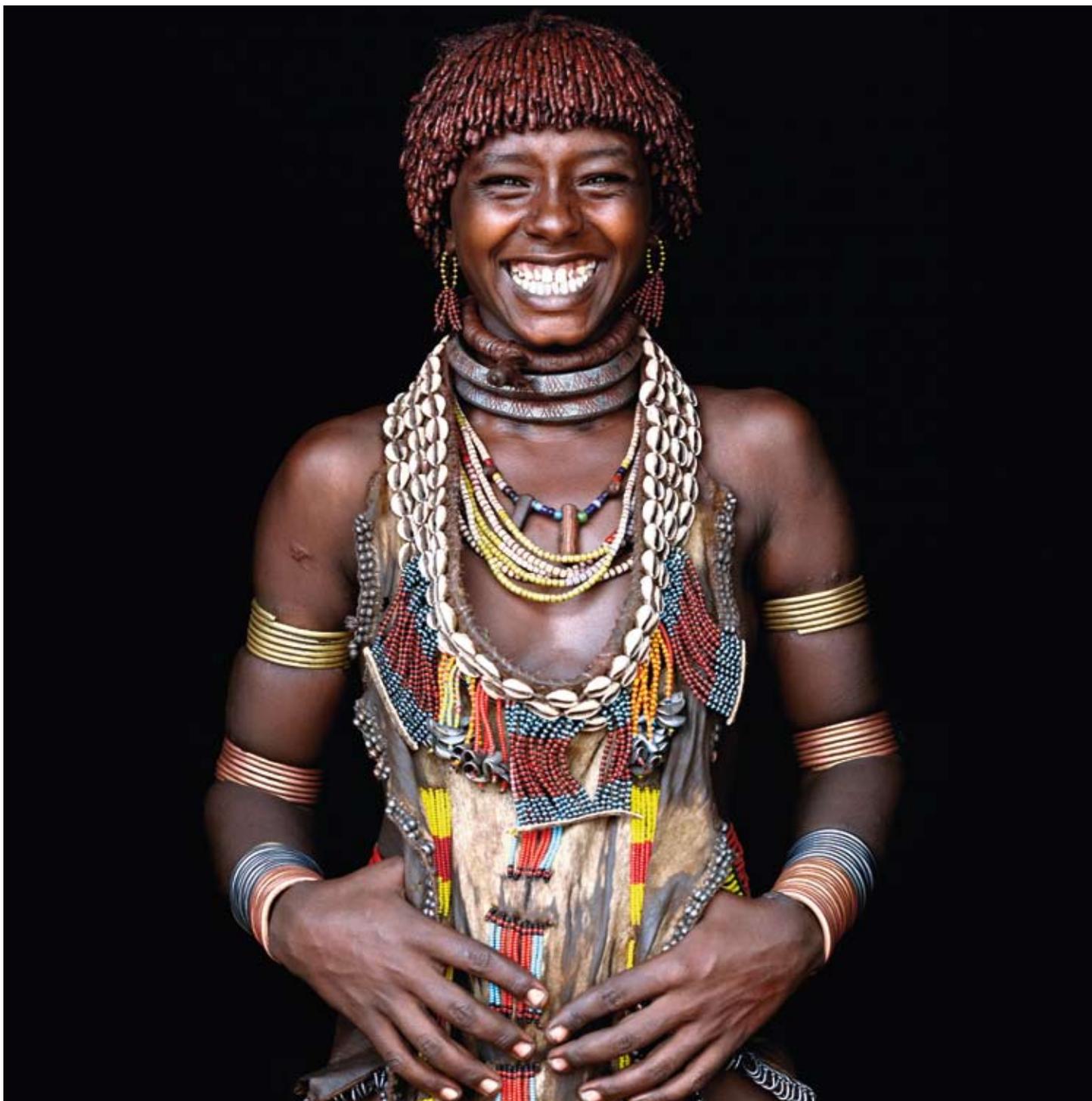
John eventually found Ancho again and showed her the picture that inspired his continuing project. 'She was standing some distance away from me and smiled

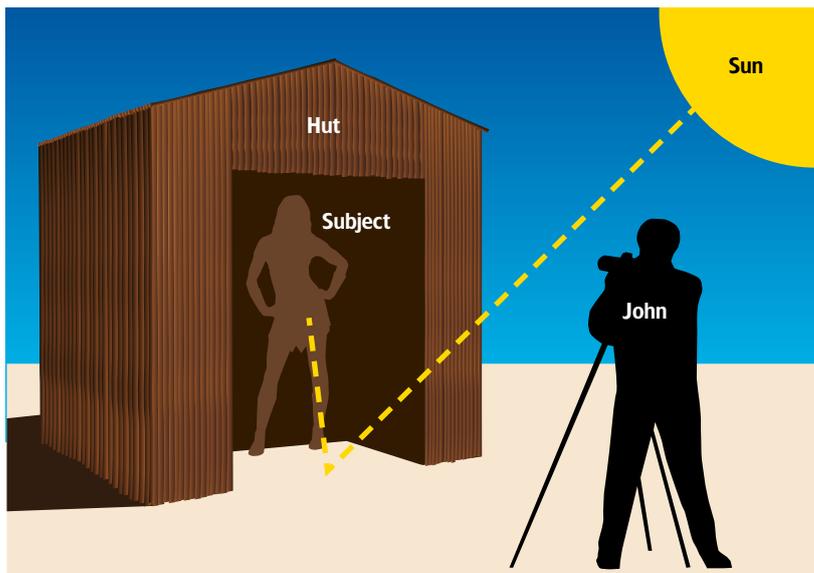
'Until that point I was only taking head-and-shoulders shots, but I decided to take her picture and caught this moment'

A 'happy accident', Ancho grinned when she saw John's image of her from two years earlier and John pressed his shutter. From the result he realised he could take wider angles and capture interesting colours and patterns

when she saw the picture. Until that point I was only taking head-and-shoulders shots, but I decided to take her picture and caught this moment (see below). It was at a different magnification from all the other portraits I'd shot, but it really worked. It was a happy accident.'

Whereas on the first trip John had used an enthusiast-level DSLR, which didn't have the resolution to expand to exhibition-size prints, he now had a Canon EOS 5D that allowed him to shoot these wider angles and still capture fine detail at the enlargements he wanted. 'I hadn't considered capturing the torso detail before,' he says. 'Many people wear bright clothing and create decorative





scarring on their skin. My second portrait of Ancho made me realise I could not only capture these details, but that I could capture stunning colours as well. With these wider angle portraits I think the image loses a bit of its impact when you translate it to black & white. I knew the tones would look nice, but the trade off of losing the colour from these people's daily lives wouldn't be worth it.'

The eyes are another favourite feature of John's. 'I'm incredibly drawn to take conclusions from people's eyes,' he says. 'I didn't think I needed to photograph in such a way that the eyes fly out of the frame.'

But the way that I shoot into darkness, with light streaming in from the outside the composition, creates a composition with so few distractions that the eyes, with nothing to distract from around the person, become very prominent.'

As John doesn't use flash, the eyes of his subject aren't smeared and the viewer can actually see what the subject is seeing when his or her picture was taken. 'If I shot with flash, you'd see a ring or nothing at all,' he says. 'Here, though, you can see my camera setup and everyone else crowded behind me (see above). It's a really nice product

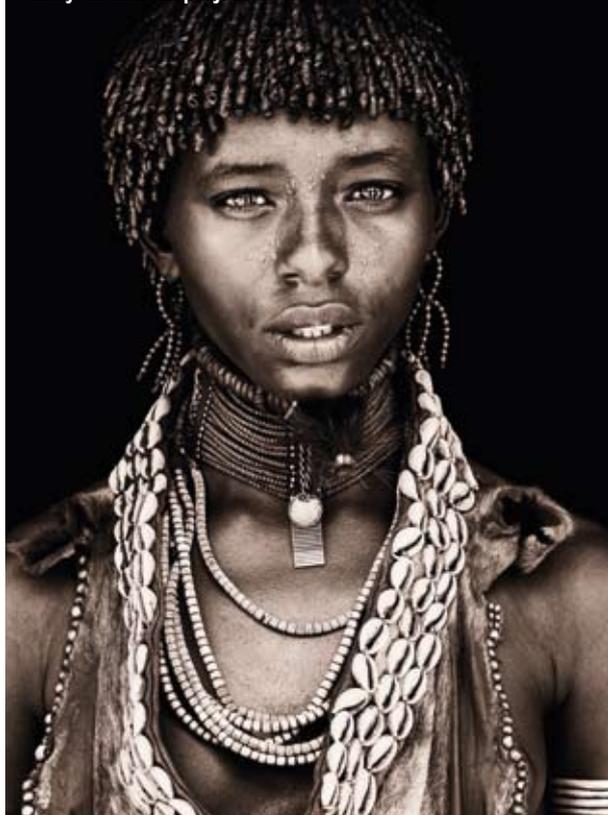
Above: John is visible in the eyes of this enlargement of one of his portrait subjects. Not using flash, he says, allows him to capture such fine detail

of this style of shooting with natural light. There's as much detail as I could capture within the limits of my technology.'

Detail is ultimately what John is after, and as he works another stint in IT and considers his options, he reckons this pursuit of detail will lead him to large-format cameras. 'I like the challenge of thinking about everything in the frame,' he says. 'When someone grabs my attention, I like trying recreate that sense of proximity and intimacy within the frame.' **AP**

To see more of John Kenny's images visit www.john-kenny.com

John's first image of Ancho from 2006, which inspired him to carry on with his project



BALANCING TWO CAREERS

PEOPLE often wonder how photographers can take long photographic trips abroad and maintain their life back in the UK. As IT jobs are in constant demand, John says this has given him incredible flexibility in his photographic pursuits. 'I'd really like to photograph full-time, but at the same time I don't want to completely jack in my career in IT,' says John (pictured). 'I like having two careers, particularly because by the time I pick up a camera after a spell of working in IT I'm usually desperate to take pictures again. By having some distance from photography, it allows me to build up inspiration and throw myself back into it.'

John also does contract work, which helps maintain his professional standing because it allows him to finish a job naturally without having to resign and risk gaining a stigma as not being committed to his work. 'I'm also very fortunate to be doing something that has such a flexible labour market, particularly given the current economic climate,' he adds.

'There is sometimes a belief that the path to being a good photographer is to finish school, maybe have a job for a while and then quit to take pictures full time. Today, though, I don't think that is the way people should be looking to forge a career as a photographer. You have to try to make ends meet at the same time as you indulge in your love of photography. I don't think it should be seen as a failure to have a nine-to-five job at the same time as you pursue your photographic ambitions. Maybe my rate of progress would be faster if I were fully immersed in my art rather than dividing my time, but I'm not sure I'd be able to maintain the passion if I did it day in and day out. Having a break every so often gives me the head space to digest what I've done while at the same time earning enough to fund my next trip.'

