

# It's all in the eyes

**T**here's a piercing intensity to British photographer John Kenny's portraits, a magnetism that draws you into the lives of the people before his lens.

John has travelled to some of the most remote places on the African continent: villages and towns where the trappings of the 21st century are barely evident. He's hitched-hiked, walked and driven from the dusty marketplaces of the Sahara to the valleys of Kenya and Ethiopia, and south to the empty wastes of the Kalahari.

Using the simple combination of sunlight and a dark doorway, he has photographed tribes you've probably never even heard of: the Samburu, Turkana, Rendille, Betamaribe...

John is fascinated by people who live in parched, isolated and harsh environments. He is inspired by them and sees photography as a means to share their stories. There's no need for a cluttered background or a long narrative – each wrinkle, bead and piercing is an essay in itself.

Being pale and blond has caused a few "lost-in-translation" incidents, says John. In the Kaisut Desert in northern Kenya, for example, a Rendille man was intrigued by the "blue" blood that seemed to run through John's veins. He and his friends thought the photographer was some sort of visiting deity!

These kinds of encounters opened up dialogue between the photographer and his subjects, and in almost all cases they were happy to pose.

"Mirrors aren't an obsession like they are in our culture," John says. "Sometimes this is the first time they've seen an image of themselves."



**JOHN KENNY**  
On my bedside table:  
*The Famished Road*  
by Ben Okri  
iPod playlist:  
*The Age of Adz*  
by Sufjan Stevens

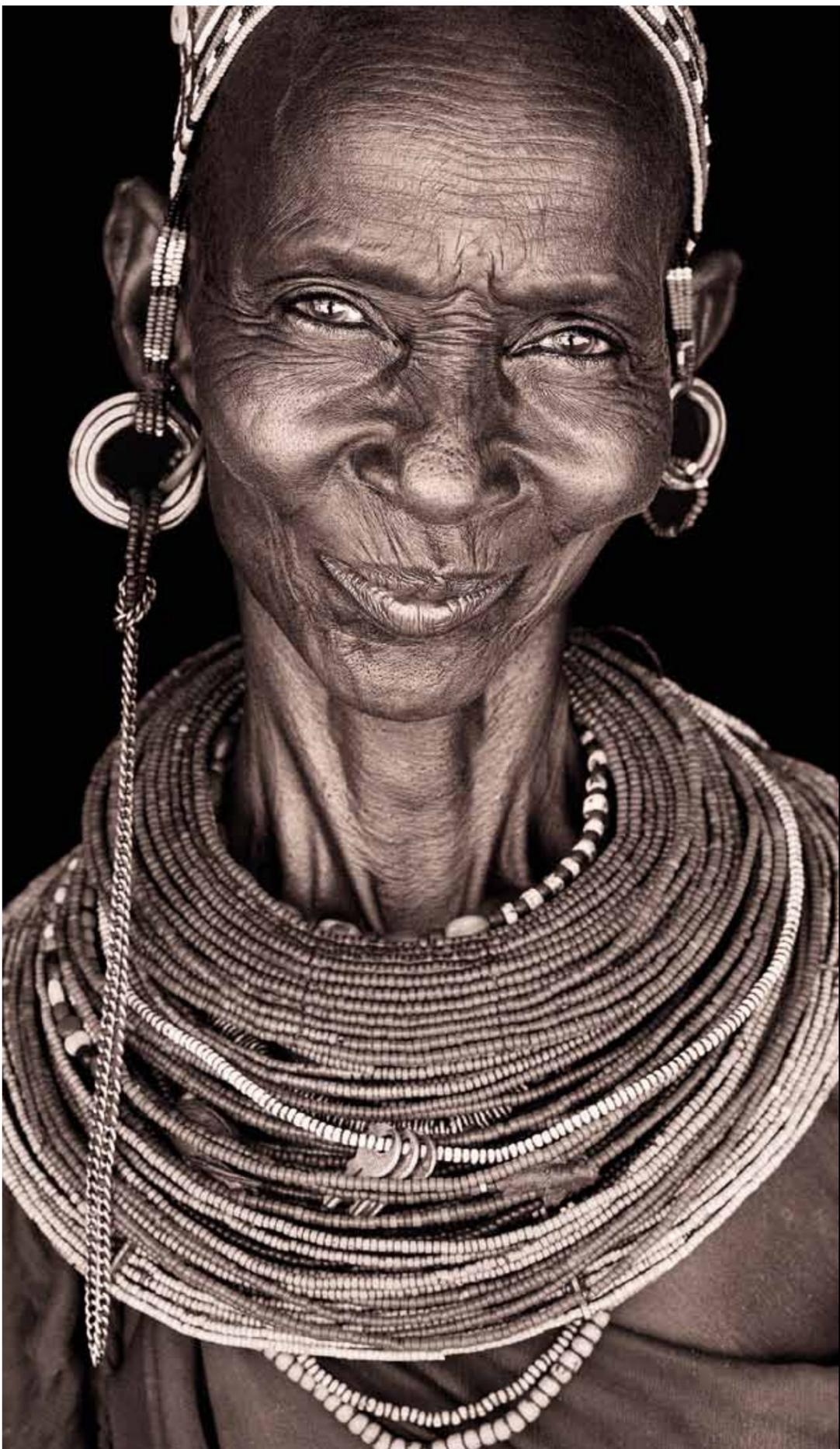
## ► PAIN WITH PURPOSE

"I met this Nuer man in the far west of Ethiopia, a few kilometres from the border with Sudan, his home country. He had the most incredible facial scarification I had ever seen. The line scars were most likely made using a sharp blade like a razor, and the holes by puncturing the skin using a thorn or fish hook.

"There is no single reason why the members of many African tribes perform this ritual. For some tribes it's purely aesthetic, a signal of belonging; in other tribes it's done for religious or social reasons."

**HOW?** Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85 mm lens, aperture f8, shutter speed 1/40 second, ISO 640.





### ◀ EACH PIECE TELLS A STORY

"I photographed this enchanting Rendille lady in a village in the Kaisut Desert in northern Kenya, one of the 'purest' parts of the Rendille homeland where their culture has not yet been eroded by that of surrounding tribes.

"Her jewellery tells the story of her life and present circumstances, like the long chain that runs down from her right ear, which signals that she married a man much older than her. This practice is common among the Rendille and Samburu, where men may not marry until they have completed their 'warrior' phase. This phase can account for up to 12 years of a man's adult life."

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85 mm lens, aperture f9, shutter speed 1/80 second, ISO 500.

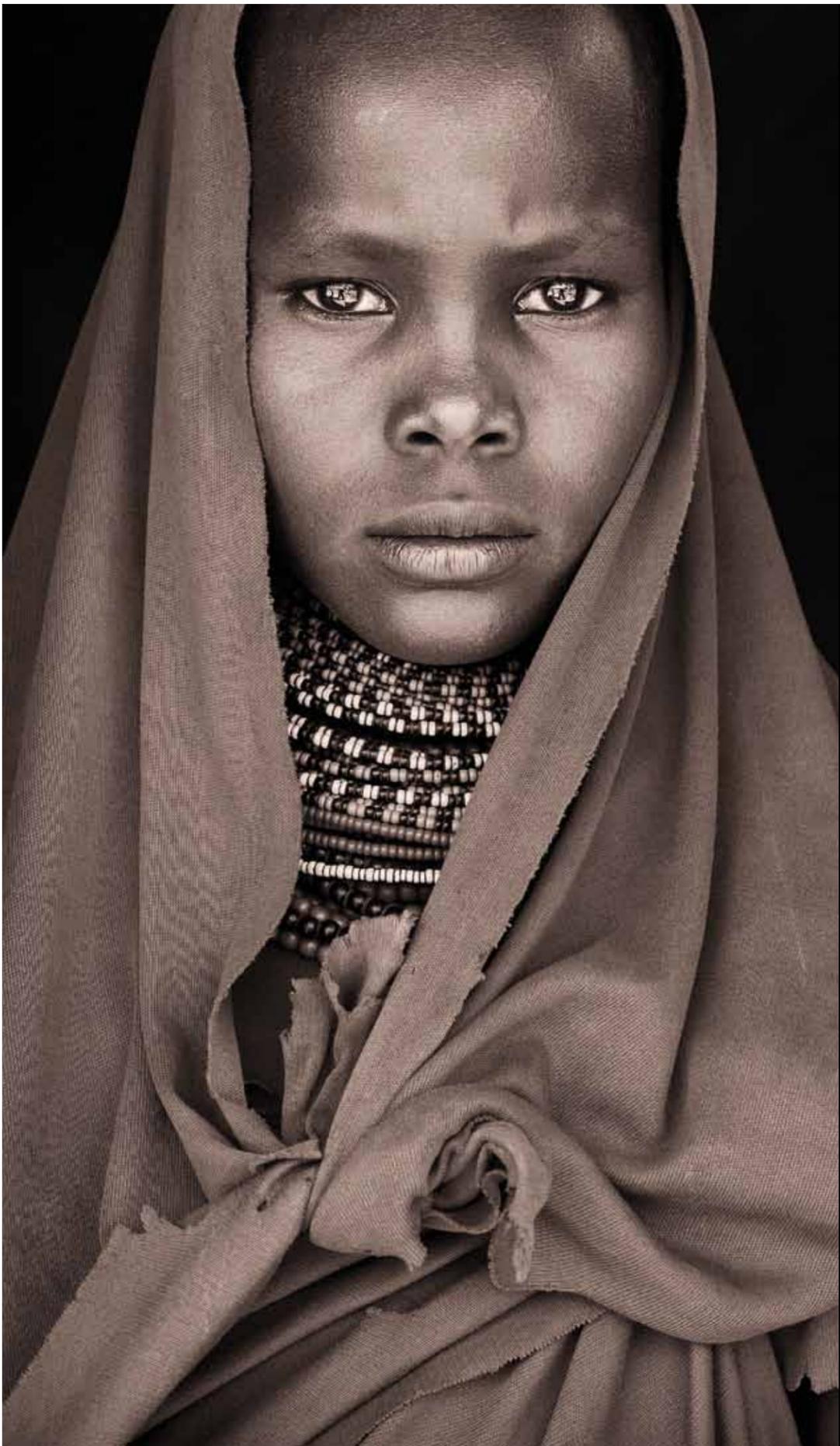
### ▶ WANDERING BEAUTY

"This Wodaabe girl emerged from the desert scrub with her mother and sisters, en route to a windswept village market in Niger. They were all dressed in the traditional dark cloth typical of this nomadic tribe.

"The girl's equally captivating mother approached me and proudly showed me her daughter. The girl had an enchanting look and her huge, bright eyes burnt with an inner fire that you often see in people who live in this hot, arid part of Africa."

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85 mm lens, aperture f9, shutter speed 1/100 second, ISO 500.





## ◀ LIFE ON THE LAKESHORE

"This young Turkana girl was walking with her head shielded from the fierce midday sun in Loiyangalani, a town on the south-eastern shore of Lake Turkana in Kenya. Although the Turkana live close to the lake, few live directly on the shore. I later found out why: The water is salty so neither humans nor animals can drink it, and its fringe is host to scorpions and snakes. And then there are the crocodiles that regularly kill fishermen and swimmers..."

"It's understandable then that the Turkana, who come from a life of nomadic pastoralism, generally leave activities on the lake to their fishermen neighbours, the El Molo, who trade their catch of crocodile, tilapia and Nile perch."

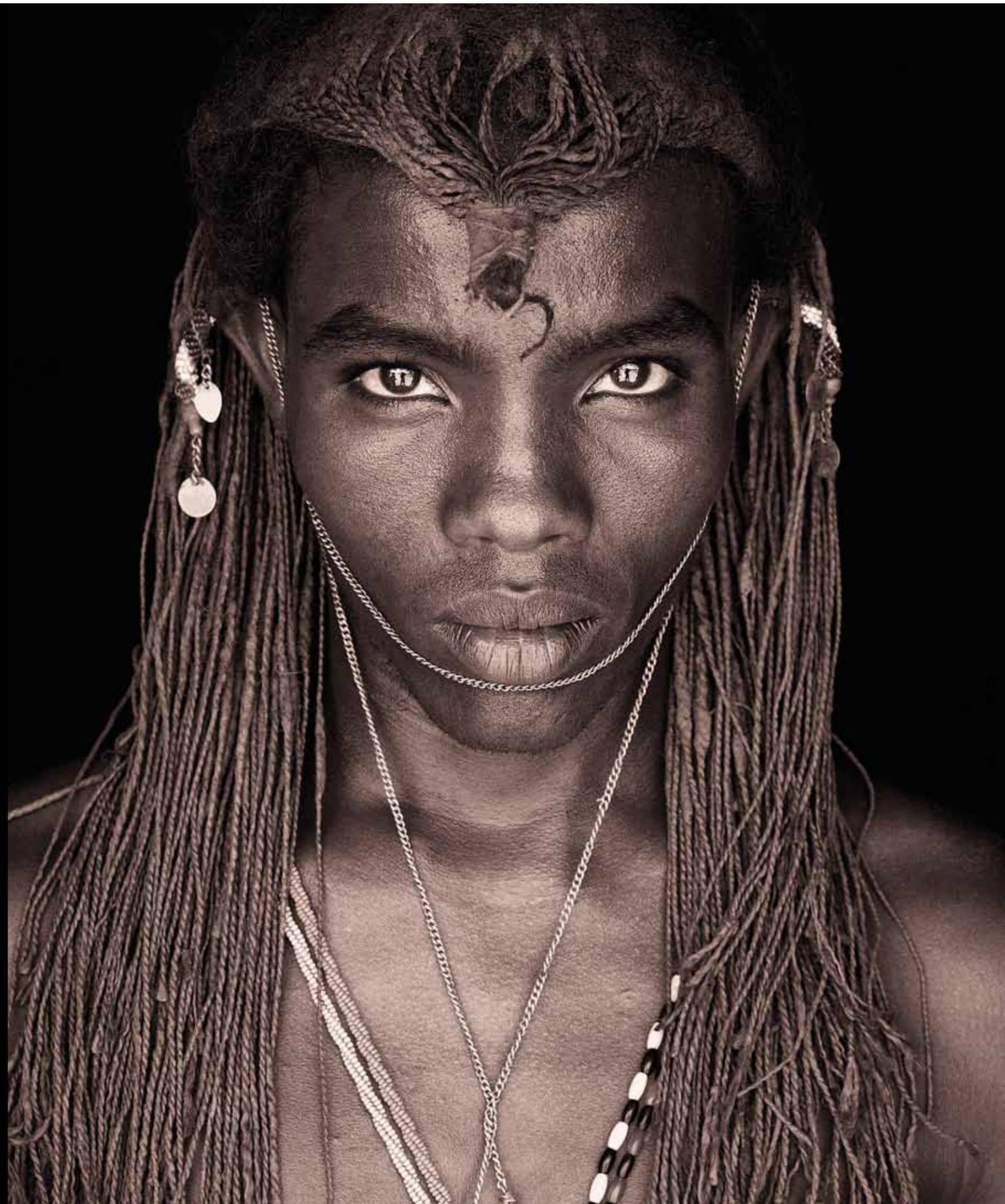
HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85 mm lens, aperture f9, shutter speed 1/60 second, ISO 500.

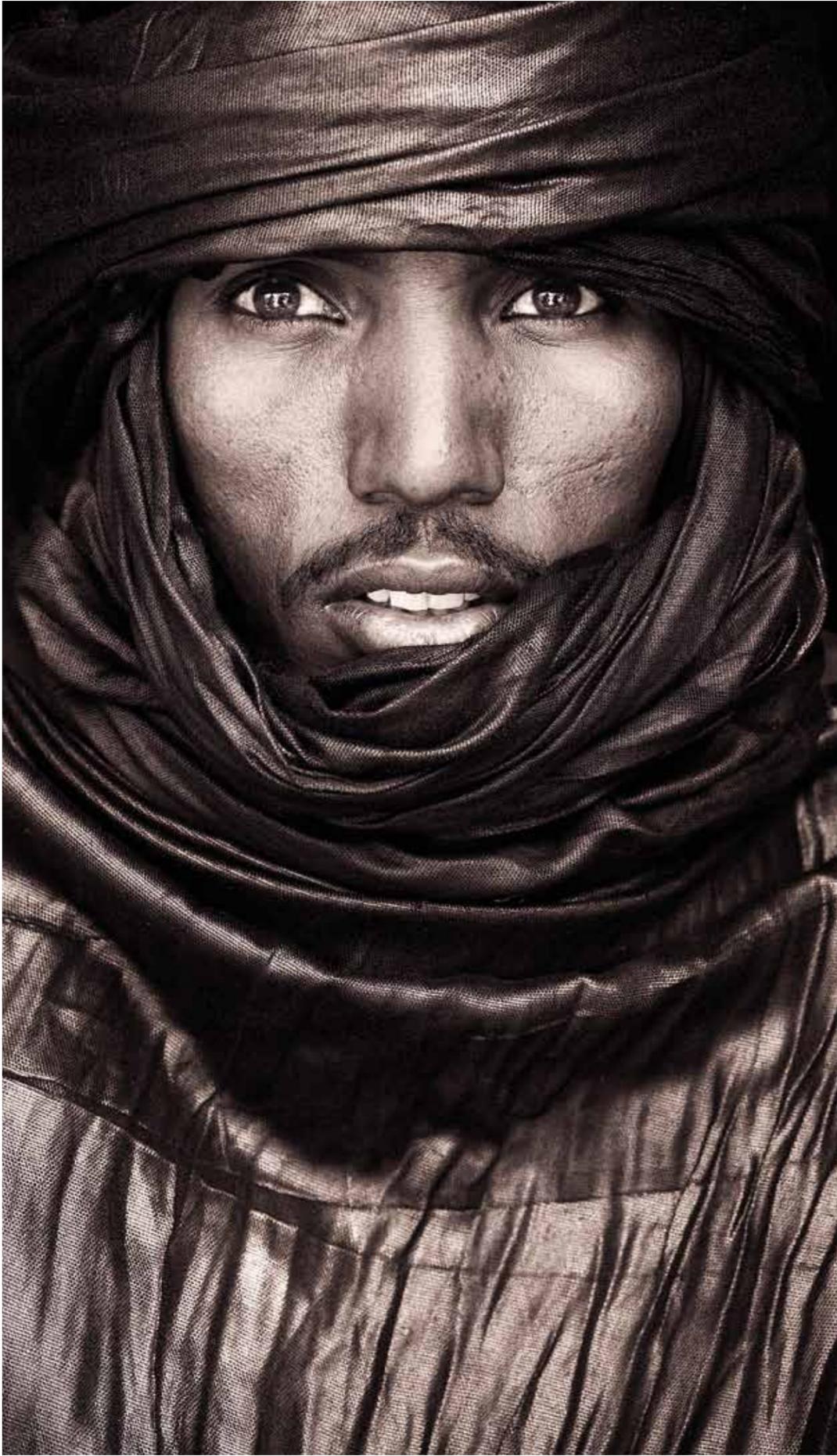
## ▶ LTIRIYAN THE BRAVE

"I met this Rendille *moran* (warrior) called Ltiriyen at the water wells in Laisamis, a settlement in northern Kenya. He was with about 10 other young men who were sitting in the shade to wait out the heat of the day. I chatted to them through an interpreter for about an hour, then they prepared their camels and set off into the desert again.

"Ltiriyen was the most outspoken – he was as fascinated by me as I was by him. When he noticed the blue colour of the veins running across my forearms, he could barely contain himself: He thought I was some sort of divine being! It took the better part of half an hour to convince him that I was as normal as he was."

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85 mm lens, aperture f9, shutter speed 1/60 second, ISO 500.





### ◀ TUAREG EYES

"I photographed this Tuareg man at the Festival of the Desert in Essakane, 80 km north of Timbuktu in Mali. He was leading his camels towards the summit of a nearby dune, where his countrymen were preparing for a camel race. His mesmerising eyes reflect his intense, earnest demeanour."

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85 mm lens, aperture f8, shutter speed 1/60 second, ISO 640.

### ▶ EASTER ENCOUNTER

"Drive south for a few hours from Lake Turkana in Kenya and you'll come to the village of Baragoi, an oasis of sorts in the otherwise arid landscape. Here, unlike in many other parts of Kenya, the Turkana live peacefully alongside the Samburu, who are in the minority. You often see young Samburu men wandering through the village smiling and holding hands with each other."

"This woman's leaf-shaped earrings and the single metal hoop around her neck shows that she is married. I met her in Baragoi on Easter Sunday – she was part of a big crowd of Turkana women singing at the front of a procession, holding aloft a wooden cross. It might come as a surprise to some, but many communities in northern Kenya are Christian. The Turkana, in particular, were targeted and converted many years ago by European missionaries."

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85 mm lens, aperture f9, shutter speed 1/80 second, ISO 500.

Visit [www.john-kenny.com](http://www.john-kenny.com) to see more of John's work and to see where his wanderlust will take him next.

