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Documenting Kenya and The Samburu Project

By Iris Schneider | December 8, 2016 11:45 PM

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Jongoy in front of her manyatta in Samburu, in Kenya. Photo by Iris Schneider.

For many years I had searched for a way to go to Africa with an organization that was improving the lives of women. In July I traveled to the arid landscape of Samburu, Kenya with **The Samburu Project**, a Santa Monica based non-profit that brings clean water to rural villages.

A pastoral, nomadic and peaceful people, the beauty and creativity of the Samburu is awe-inspiring, but they live a primitive life in poverty and face many challenges. Very much a tribal culture--Kenya has 42 tribes nationwide--the women bear children and marry at a very young age, sometimes as early as 14 or 15, and still undergo female genital mutilation as part of their tribal rituals. There is little access to healthcare. The men have multiple wives. The children have only sporadic access to education-- many families cannot even afford the \$6 monthly fee to send their children to school. But access to clean water is by far their greatest challenge.

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Traveling to Africa was the realization of a lifelong dream for me. I spent a week visiting well communities and talking, with the help of locals, to the women whose lives have been changed by having wells nearby. Now, instead of walking for hours to search for water for their families, they can walk to closer wells that assure the water they bring home will be uncontaminated. In Samburu, diarrhea from contaminated water is the biggest cause of child death.

My trip to Africa was a window into a vastly different world. As many Westerners who I met on my trip told me, "Africa gets under your skin," and I definitely felt that this would be the first of many trips there. The need in Africa is great, and there are many there trying to meet it. The many locals I met live a life vastly different from mine. We have what is called a drought in California, but we still can turn on the faucet in our home and get clean water. Most children I met have nothing. No toys, often no shoes, little to eat. But their demeanor was joyful. The anxieties that many Westerners feel about their lives simply does not exist in this rural environment. But other differences were striking. The women I talked to could not fathom how I had not married until I was 42, or that I gave birth to my daughter at 47. "What did you do all that time before you had your children?" they wondered.

For the Samburu, childbirth is a ritual that starts early and children are a sign of wealth. Trying to explain the decision to work as a journalist and tell other people's stories was a challenge. Telling them that I flew in an airplane for 20 hours to get to them brought a look of wonder to their faces. Sitting in the only chair in the village, brought to me by several youngsters who sat around me and stroked my arm as we talked, almost brought me to tears. We respected each other's different journeys, found things to laugh about and enjoyed sharing our differences and how we were brought together to learn about each others' lives.

I was happy to have the chance to document the lives of the people I met in Samburu, and hope to share my photographs and experiences now that I am back home. I was constantly reminded of how lucky we are to have water in our homes and how so much of the world lives under far more dangerous and stressful conditions. And my trip made me realize how much of our lives is pre-determined just by virtue of where we happen to be born.

In conjunction with The Samburu Project, my photographs will be shown at Kopeikin Gallery, 2766 S. La Cienega Blvd., LA 90034 this Sunday, Dec. 11 from 2-5 p.m.

See more photos from Samburu

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