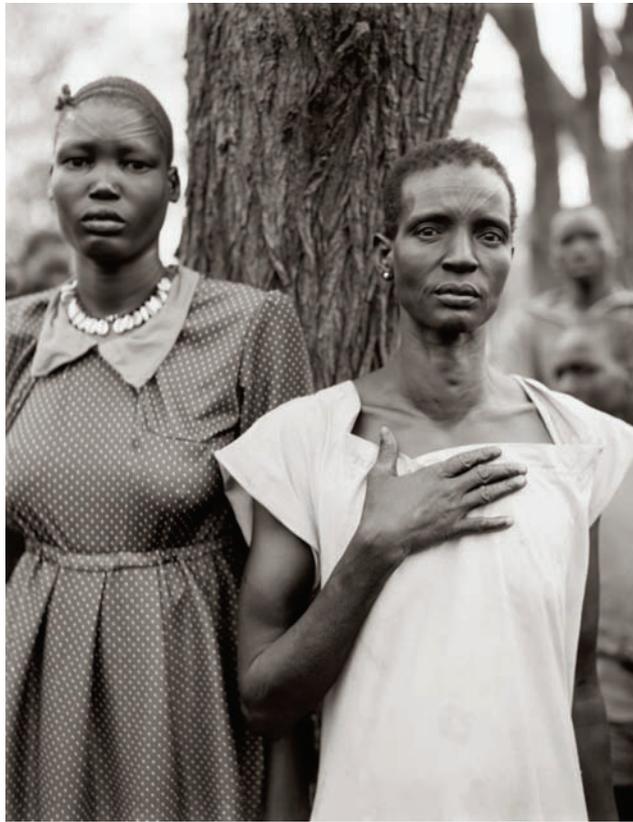


From *Witness in Our Time: Working Lives of Documentary Photographers*, Ken Light
Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000, 2nd ed., 2010
A series of edited interviews with selected photographers.
'Fazal Sheikh: Portrait of a Refugee'
Ken Light



*Ajob Achot and Achol Manyen, Sudanese refugee camp
Lokichoggio, Kenya, 1992*

Fazal Sheikh, born in 1965 in New York City, has a Kenyan father and an American mother. He studied at Princeton University, under the photographer Emmet Gowin, and graduated in 1987. He has received several grants, including a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, the Leica Medal of Excellence, and a Fulbright scholarship.

In 1992 Sheikh's concern over the refugee problem in Africa led him to the northwestern border of Kenya, where thousands of Sudanese refugees had gathered. Sheikh stayed for several weeks photographing the refugees, using a large-format camera, a tool most often associated with portraiture and landscape photography. His aim was to provide a more in-depth study of the camp refugees than ordinary photojournalism could afford. His photographs were collected and published in the book *A Sense of Common Ground* and exhibited in New York, Houston, Chicago, Rotterdam, and Geneva in 1996.

More recently, Sheikh has photographed Afghans in exile in Pakistan, including women abused and tortured by different rulers, elders, and warriors who brought their families across the border for safety. A book and exhibition of this work, *Fazal Sheikh: The Victor Weeps*, was completed in 1998.

In 1992 I was given a Fulbright fellowship to document the Swahili communities of the Kenyan coast. I traveled to Kenya and began preparations for the trip. In the year since my last visit, nearly five hundred thousand refugees from Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia had flooded into northern Kenya in search of a safe haven from the civil wars in their home countries.

Before heading to the coast I was given permission by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to visit the Sudanese refugee camp at Kakuma, a small village in the northern desert. This camp provided sanctuary to more than twenty-five thousand Sudanese refugees. Of that number, twelve thousand were “Unaccompanied Minors” – children between the ages of eight and eighteen who were either orphaned or separated from their parents in the flight from their homes.

On the appointed morning I arrived at the airport for a pre-flight briefing by the United Nations spokesman. In the course of his description of what we would encounter, he told us about the Unaccompanied Minors who had been abducted by the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army, forcibly conscripted, and sent to military training in southern Ethiopia. Many had walked more than one thousand kilometers through the desert in search of sanctuary in Kenya.

Later, as the plane moved away from Nairobi over the desert, the words of the spokesman resounded in my ears. I remember feeling reticent about my place among the journalists. In an hour we were circling over the camp in our descent toward the border.

On landing the others with whom I traveled immediately began their work. They seemed to know exactly what they wanted. I experienced a kind of paralysis and had no idea how to begin working in the midst of such turmoil. The spokesman’s description of how I should meet this place and the throngs of people in the camp seemed to banish thought. Now, as I look back upon that time of unknowing, I see what a turning point it was for me.

I decided to stay on in the village, giving myself time to sift through the initial impressions. During the first few days, I wandered throughout the camp without photographing. Eventually, I approached Deng Dau, the elder of the community. He greeted me generously, and we sat together in his home. During the course of our conversation, I asked his permission to begin working in his village. He turned to me and said, “Why do you ask me? I am only a refugee.”

The meaning of the words was clear – “If I am a refugee, you may do as you like, and it is not my place to give, or withhold, consent.” But the tone of his voice laid bare the irony of those words. It had been a trespass for people to storm through the camp without consulting those whom they were photographing. Yet he agreed to the collaboration, and we began a work of documentation, which continued for two years.

With this approach, I discovered a way of working that I have retained on other projects. Now, I recognize the initial sense of unknowing when first visiting a community and embrace it as part of the process. I see it as a sign of receptivity to what the place and the people have to offer. I begin by asking the members of the community for their willingness to collaborate in the documentation. In my recent work among the Afghan villages of exile, the elder’s agreement to work with me, to provide insight, as well as protection, has been crucial.

Many of the images that I make are formal portraits. I use a simple Polaroid camera that yields both a positive and a negative. The slow process dictates the pace of the work. The act of photographing becomes an event in the village. We construct the image together. Many of the people have never been photographed before, and the Polaroid provides a point of reference for the discussions that follow in which the residents of the community offer their opinions on how the documentation may unfold.

For so long I have thought about “African” and “refugee” – such loaded terms. The media seems preoccupied with encapsulating communities and paring them down to myopic tag lines. There is a horrifying element to the refugee stories from Somalia and Rwanda, but the lives of those people are more complex than the way that they have been represented. Being an African or a refugee is only one facet of who they are as human beings. I would like to balance out the equation, to broaden and challenge our preconceptions as structured by the media.

When I began working on the Somali border, I had a conversation one evening with a Kenyan doctor who was working in the camp’s hospital. He told me about Somali parents smothering their malnourished children. This he described as evidence of the “essentially callous and aggressive nature of Somalis.”

Later that night, as I lay alone in my tent thinking about the doctor’s story, I decided to spend some time in one of the camp’s feeding centers. I was interested in testing the doctor’s explanation of the reasons for such incidents. During the weeks spent in the feeding center, mothers or siblings brought the malnourished children – fifty in all – to the center twice daily to receive their treatment. They would sit for photographs, the gesture and gaze revealing the familial bond.

In my last days there a nurse told me of a mother and child who had recently arrived from the desert. The woman was registered in the camp and – as the child was severely malnourished – they were immediately brought to the feeding center.

When the woman saw how the treatment was reviving the children, she broke down. She related the story of how, during the flight through the desert from Somalia into Kenya, she had smothered the first of her two children. Now, in the feeding center, she was forced to confront the possibility that what she had thought to be an act of sacrifice in sparing the infant’s suffering, might, in some sense, have been an unnecessary death.

The body of images, names, and stories from that time, later exhibited in a large grid and a mainstay of the *A Sense of Common Ground*, provide a visual response to the doctor’s declaration. There is the question, in this case the doctor’s assertion, and then there is the documentation that explores the issue. In this way the working process becomes fluid and revelatory.

As I worked in Africa and Afghanistan, I realized that many of the connections and decisions about where to work are based upon intuition. After working in the tribal area of northern Pakistan for several months, I realized that my time there was not only about documenting the situation of the Afghan refugees and the history of the war, but also searching of the legacy of my grandfather and his relationship to Islam. Although it is inevitable that the photographs are also a product of who I am, I hope that my perceptions defer to or mingle with those of the people that I photograph, allowing a personal chord to resonate within them.

The people in the photographs often look directly into the camera and, by extension, to the viewer. There are no visual gymnastics, and the image is pared down to what I believe to be its essential nature. The sitters present themselves. My role is not to confer upon, but rather to encourage that which is already inherently part of the person to come forward. The strength of a sitter’s gaze and an entire life lived in their bodies speaks for itself.

I am unable to predict what will be a strong photograph. The most compelling images have come from remaining receptive to what the place has to offer. A photograph with its roots in my imagination pales in comparison to that which is given in the moment of collaboration. In the time following my engagement with the people, the experience lingering in my mind

overwhelms my perceptions of the photographs. It takes quite a while before I am able to recognize the strength of any given image. Time and distance provide a frame of context.

I traveled with a Somali woman who was working for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. She was recording the testimonials of women who had been assaulted and raped in the border region. The Kenyan government denied the allegations of such happenings for fear of a negative impact on tourism.

I have always been troubled by the notion that a person becomes the subject of a photograph simply because they have been raped. It is not the sum total of who they are. For their part, the women understood that the images and their stories would be shown in public, and they still insisted upon speaking out. However, I felt protective of the trust they had placed in us, and I struggled with the responsibility of bringing those testimonials to light.

For nearly three years after photographing those women and recording their stories, I refrained from using them. When piecing together *A Sense of Common Ground*, the book from those years, I skirted the issue of their inclusion. I now realize that by omitting them I had perhaps failed in my charge. The women who we met had gone through such trauma that they ultimately wore it as a badge of honor, a declaration that they had persevered in a society that ostracizes and shuns the victims of sexual abuse. Now, when showing that body of work, I include the images and the testimonials in their own voices, unfiltered.

At a pivotal point in my development as a documentary photographer, I read *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. I found that text and image could be used together in such a way that each retains their dignity and individual strength, yet together they make a greater statement. They function in separate realms, yet they inform one another. Neither element serves as illustration or embellishment.

In my recent work, that is what keeps me busy. In confronting the complexity of Afghan society, the people's relationship to Islam, and the depths of both hospitality and loss within that culture, I have become aware of the need for text to elaborate upon the message of the photographs.

I hope that my work reaches toward a greater good. However, I am not willing to achieve that goal at the expense of the individual. I believe that it is the individual and his testimony that allows us to access broader themes – through the specific to gain entry to the universal. I want to be able to go to a community and ask that it teach me about its truth. I try to encourage the medium to pierce the alienation in a return to the basics of humanity.