

Learning for Peace - The Pokot School Project



Article by Snowden Bishop, AZGreen Magazine

Photography by Carl Beckwith and Angela Fisher – See more of their extraordinary works: www.africanceremonies.com

Imagine living in an area so remote that schools simply don't exist. Imagine that by the age of nine, your child is brandishing a gun instead of reading a book. It seems unfathomable, but this is the reality of children living a remote tribal war zone in northwestern Kenya.

The region is Africa's most remote frontier, a lawless land saturated with weapons, where tribesmen make their own rules, cattle is the ultimate currency, and rustling is a way of life. There are no roads, no medical facility, and no school. The nearest city is a two-day drive, and the nearest medical clinic is a two-day journey, mostly on foot.

In the middle of the region is an area known as Ng'aina, which is primarily occupied by the Pokot tribe, a traditionally honorable people who, for generations, have been forced to literally fight for survival. Their livelihood depends upon the wholeness of their cattle herds. The largest threat to the Pokot people comes from the neighboring Turkana tribe, another nomadic cattle rustling group intent on stealing livestock from the Pokot herds.

Each year, hundreds of Pokot tribe members die defending livestock from cattle raids initiated by rival tribes. Over the last half century, the warfare has gradually become modernized with

weapons introduced by bandits from neighboring Ethiopia and Somalia. Today, the weapons range from ordinary shotguns to automatic rifles. By the age of nine, Pokot boys are sent to the “Cow Place,” a veritable boot camp where they are trained by elders to rustle cattle and handle a variety of weapons. Their training takes approximately one year to complete, after which the boys are sent out with their fathers and brothers to defend the livestock – and defend their own lives.



The battle-weary Pokot people have become entrenched in a cycle of violence that has plagued their culture for generations. Pokot elders know that securing a brighter future for their children will require learning about a better way of life. Self-made efforts to introduce education have been futile thus far. The task of finding a teacher or other logistical support for building a school presents a daunting task, according to Pokot Chief Yatta. Rarely visited by outsiders, the Pokot region is so savage even

the Kenya army stays away. A number of incidents involving army personnel being killed or threatened upon entering the region have dissuaded further intrusion. Rumor has it that a number of Army officers have entered the territory for general inquiry and never returned.

Admittedly stuck, the Pokot elders realize that replacing guns with books will require cultural change, which likely will not occur without assistance from the modern world – assistance they had prayed for, but had never been offered.

Chief Yatta was indeed surprised when a National Geographic filmmaker, Kire Godal, asked permission to film the secretive tribe. It was an act of bravery for Godal to inquire; no one had ever been granted permission to film sacred Pokot rituals, and it had been decades since anyone dared to ask.

Conferring with tribal elders, Chief Yatta offered Godal unprecedented access to the tribe, and in exchange for the access, Godal would build the Pokot region’s first-ever school once she had completed filming.



“I had no idea how I was going to do it, but I made the promise. I could not pass up such an amazing opportunity to record the ancient customs of the Pokot people before they become too modernized,” said Godal, whose cache of films record the culture and rituals of tribes not yet affected by western influence, Christian missionaries or modern development. She considers such films urgent, and explained, “The face of Africa is changing so quickly. Many of the tribal cultures are vanishing each year due to

outside intervention.”

During the following year, Godal directed a series of three films on the Pokot tribe, each capturing the tribe’s ancient rituals and mysterious culture, and documents the powerful mysticism of some of the most secret ancient ceremonies still in existence today, and the daring

and dangerous lives of the notorious cattle rustlers. The last of the series to be completed, “Pokot: a Path to Manhood,” explores some of the most sacred ceremonies including circumcisions and “graduation” ceremonies that shepherd young generations into new “age sets” or adulthood.

Now that the majority of filming has ended, Godal has called upon close friends and family to help her keep her promise to raise the funds needed to build the Pokot Region’s first school. Inspired by the call to action, Bonnie Bishop, founder of Friends of Africa International, a non-profit 501[c](3) organization, is now leading the charge. A collaborative effort is now underway to raise the funds necessary to build the Pokot preschool and lay the foundation for a stepped up approach that, over the next 10 years, will culminate with a school system to accommodate all ages including adults, a desperately needed medical clinic, accommodations and security for teachers and other supporting infrastructure.

The commitment hastened the launch of a Scottsdale, Arizona branch of Friends of Africa, which originated in Aspen, Colorado. The parent organization was founded in 1985 after Bishop was recruited to participate in a project of the United Nations Environmental Programme headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya by its ambassador, Dr. Noel Brown. She was subsequently asked to assist fundraising efforts for Kenya’s Department of Wildlife under the direction of Dr. Richard Leaky, and established Friends of Africa as a funding conduit for a host of projects.

Friends of Africa has since supported a number of humanitarian, wildlife preservation and environmental conservation projects throughout Africa including Ian Douglas-Hamilton’s *Save the Elephants* campaign, Mpho Tutu’s efforts to aid women in South Africa, Daphne Sheldrick’s animal orphanage, and the famed Rhino Arc, to name a few. Some esteemed leaders of organizations that have received assistance from Friends of Africa now comprise the foundation’s International Advisory Board.

To initiate the Pokot School Project, her first objective was to get the Aspen Board of Directors to agree about forming a branch of Friends of Africa in Scottsdale, where Bishop has resided since 2001. Opening the Scottsdale branch was a formality, necessary for conducting fundraising activities there. Support for the new branch came without a hitch. By then, Bishop had already recruited a group of friends and family in Scottsdale, who eagerly began to rally with her for the school project under the auspices of her foundation, and her team became the newly formed Scottsdale Board of Directors.

“I was pleasantly surprised by the outpouring of support I have received from the Scottsdale Board,” said Bishop, whose next objective was to formulate a plan for the development of the first phase of the project: a preschool and medical clinic. No stranger to philanthropy, Bishop and her team decided they would host a star-studded gala benefit to raise the initial funds needed for the design and building.

With gala planning underway, Bishop’s next task was to involve her Kenya contingency and conduct a site assessment in Ng’aina. Her tour began in Nairobi, where with Godal and a Nairobi team, she began the business of registering the NGO, arranging for work permits, coordinating involvement of District Education Officers, commissioners and the U.S. Embassy. Shortly after, Bishop and Godal were joined by a contingency of 7 others including Godal’s film crew and National Geographic photographers Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith, who are internationally known for their books on African culture. In a caravan of vehicles they embarked upon the two-day journey over bumpy, dusty roads. Their first destination was the town of Kollowa, a tiny village where they met with the District Education Officer and Blue

Loribo, their Pokot language interpreter and guide. They were treated to a typical African meal of posho (cornmeal), goat stew, sukuma wiki (a variety of kale) and Kenya brewed Tusker beer.

The following morning, they drove about four hours to an abandoned Red Cross compound, where they set up a camp that would serve as their base for the week. Godal and Bishop departed the group and continued onto Ng'aina, where they were greeted by Pokot chiefs Yatta and Ben, along with their families, all of whom had long anticipated the visit.



“I was overwhelmed by the reception we received,” said Bishop, who recalled the singing and dancing and cheering that greeted them upon arrival. “They chanted as we arrived, ‘Welcome Bonnie and Kire who bring us school and medicine!’ I could see tears on some of their faces.”

Having filmed three documentaries on the Pokot rituals, Godal was well known by nearly everyone in the Pokot community – and well respected. Upon her last visit to Ng'aina several months before, she had advised them that next time she returned she would bring Bonnie Bishop to discuss logistics for the school.

The excitement ran deep – Godal's return marked confirmation that her promise would be kept, and seeing that she had brought Bishop with her instilled hope that it was only a matter of logistics before the pathway toward peace in their culture would be forged.

Without hesitation, Bishop and Godal were ushered toward a waiting group of Pokot elders, who were holding court under a giant fig tree near the river. Chief Ben spoke in broken English and translated stories told by the elders about the challenges faced by their tribe. Godal and Bishop listened to their concerns and then outlined their immediate and long range plans starting with the preschool and medical clinic's groundbreaking in the coming summer months

The first phase of the project will include a modest preschool building with an adjacent teachers' apartment. Given the abundance of termites in the region, the buildings would not be constructed using wood. Instead, each will be built using local materials such as river rock from the nearby river on a steel frame, and would be fully sustainable without requiring outside electricity or generators. A combination of solar and wind sourced power would be sufficient to run computers, fans, lights and refrigeration. A rain catchment system and water well would provide enough water for the plumbing and drinking. Natural sanitation methods would be employed to avoid contamination of the water supply or nearby river. Books and other supplies will be sourced by donations made to Friends of Africa, and eventually, the school will also be provided with a fuel-efficient vehicle.



At the end of the meeting, the elders offered gifts of gratitude. Godal was presented with a poignant gift, an “Atelo” or leather apron, which traditionally is presented to a young man who had recently graduated into the adult age set prior to his first journey as a warrior.

“When an Atelo leather piece is given, it signifies that the wearer is challenged to go out into the wilderness and kill a buffalo or lion, and bring back the skin to prove their

worthiness. It’s usually gifted from a woman to a man,” Godal explained. “By giving me the Atelo piece, they have challenged me to go out into the world and bring them back their school.”

The elders then presented Bishop with an ostrich feather crown, which is considered to be the highest honor bestowed upon Pokot women. They ceremoniously offered her the moniker, “Mama Pokot” – certainly the first time such a noble title has ever been given to an outsider. Before they left that evening, Bishop wept as Chief Yatta announced to his village that she and Godal were the answer to their prayers.

“It was a boiling hot day brimming with emotion,” said Godal. By the time it was over, the temperature had peaked at 118°F, they had run out of drinking water, and the daylight necessary to navigate the rough, roadless terrain back to their base camp was waning. “It was dusk before we returned to camp. By then, we were seeing spots.”

The following morning, the entire group gathered provisions and film equipment and departed around 4:00 am to the village of N’getenogh, where Godal and her team had arranged to document an initiation ceremony celebrating the return of nearly 200 recently circumcised “graduates” entering manhood. Each year, during the short rains, Pokot families hold sacred initiation ceremonies called Sapana, the traditional rite of passage for young men to join the ranks of their elders and become warriors.



“The ceremony was long, and resembled something out of Star Wars,” said Godal. Young men’s faces were concealed behind long string masks that would swing as they moved their heads from side to side. The ceremony ended when the mothers removed their son’s masks, replacing them with their own beaded jewelry and anointing their sons with blessed oil. “The purpose of the ritual is to teach the young men about humility.”

During the filming, Fisher and Beckwith shot still photographs of the ceremony and young initiates for their forthcoming book on rites of passage across the African continent. At the end of the day, the elders asked Godal to speak to the crowd. She recalled, “I thanked them for letting us film, and told them that the images and films would be a permanent record for their great grandchildren, that we came not only to take images, but to give back.”

She also announced their plans to build the school, and said that she hoped that now there would be more books and fewer guns. “I explained that even though the modern world may become

part of their world through education, that their cultural heritage and traditions must be honored – that the two can grow alongside each other.”



Healing Hut.

“It was very inspiring,” said Beckwith about Godal’s words, which had been met with roaring cheers from the crowd and tears shed by mothers. “Her speech sounded like it could have come from President Obama!”

The following day, the group went to film a group of initiates recovering in a “Healing Hut” in another location. According to the elders, it was the very first time that any woman, including Pokot, has ever seen the interior of a

“We were allowed in not just because we paid or because of our promise to build the school, but because – as the Chief explained – we are ‘not really women,’ since we are white and wear pants,” laughed Godal.

Their remaining days were filled with site mapping and visiting with the “mamas” of the tribe. It became clear just how profound the impact of education would be on the culture. The mamas feel helpless to do anything but watch as their young sons are thrust into harms way. The rustling customs are all they had ever known, and breaking the cycle of violence needs to begin with children too young to know differently. They fear it is too late to expect those children already involved in the rustling to ever change their course in life. But to begin a process of change with the youngest generation may be key to changing their future.

The women also talked about the hardships they endure because of the remoteness of the area and lack of any medical services.

“I was astonished to learn that a mother would have to carry an ill child for 45 miles in the scorching heat to reach a bus stop, where they would hope to catch a bus for a two-hour drive to reach the nearest medical facility,” said Bishop. Unfortunately, most sick children don’t survive the arduous journey. “It is humbling to realize just how fortunate we are to have any access to schools or proper medical facilities at all.”

Despite the violence that occurs to protect their livelihood, the Pokot people are steeped in tradition that is deeply rooted in their spiritual beliefs. They take their rituals and the passage of each phase of life very seriously. They are also very devoted to their closely-knit families, and harbor reverence and respect for their elders. Their culture is one of the few that has remained untouched by western influences and modern civilization. So far, they haven’t become jaded by tourism, converted by missionaries or affected by commercial enterprise, like so many of the vanishing tribes in Africa have been.

“Kire and I share a common vision for the school. We are eager to help them preserve their own traditions, spiritual beliefs and customs,” said Bishop. The Pokot elders expressed their gratitude for that as well. “I believe they appreciate that we want to help and have no intention to impose our values upon them. It is gratifying to know that.”

Godal and Bishop have kept their promise to raise the funds needed to build the Pokot Region's first school. In April, 2011, Bishop's foundation, Friends of Africa International, hosted star-studded gala benefit in Scottsdale that marked the start of fulfilling their commitment. The benefit featured an award ceremony to honor LPGA Hall of Famer Betsy King, Red Carpet jeweler Chris Aire, NFL champion Mike Davis, NFL's Larry Fitzgerald, celebrity judge Lynn Toler, Diamondbacks philanthropist Kristine Hedlund, and other notables who have dedicated themselves to supporting children and education throughout the world.



“We are delighted to report that the benefit successfully raised enough money to construct the school,” said Bishop, who supervised the construction of the preschool to completion in March of 2012. Friends of Africa is now focused on raising funds to build the Pokot

region's first medical clinic. “We're so grateful for the support we've received so far, but the journey has just begun, and we'll need more help.”

This article first appeared in the Spring 2011 issue of [AZGreen Magazine](#), a proud sponsor of Friends of Africa and the Pokot School Project.