



# Faces of Dignity

*Reflections on People and Places*  
Jeffrey T. DeKock





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*Reflections on People and Places*

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Front Cover: Naarrau Amiyo in Dubsahai Amiyo village, Rendilleland, Kenya

Back Cover: Sunset at the Samara Refugee Camp, Algeria

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On Tuesday nights in high school I began visiting the Grandville Friendship Home, where five physically and mentally impaired men lived. My first night there Steve, 40 or so with Down syndrome, asked me to play pool. I said sure.

Before we began I decided to let him win. I hoped he was good enough that the game wouldn't take all night. As we played I noticed that he struck the balls well, but never seemed to drop any in the pockets. I tried to do the same, hitting the balls close but not on target. My skills were limited; I kept trying to miss, but slowly I started to fill the pockets. At last, with regret I sank the final shot. Steve asked if I wanted to play again, but I suggested we play cards instead. A rambunctious game of Skip-Bo followed. Cards became our Tuesday night tradition.

A year later I had come to know the guys well, and they asked me to join them for a few days over Christmas break.

When I showed up for the holidays, I noticed that the cover on the pool table was dusty and unused in quite some time. But one night Steve again asked me to play. Hesitantly, I agreed.

I broke, but not a single ball headed into a pocket. Then Steve went. With precise aim and minimal effort he masterfully cleared the table.

Faces is a reflection on people from around the world who, like Steve, are moving in their shared dignity. In perhaps the most unlikely of everyday places and moments, their lives humble, educate, inspire.

This book is dedicated to them.



December 2009









# Rendilleland

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Though I'd lived with the Rendille people for months, most of them were never quite sure if I was an idiot or not. But they were certain about one thing: he doesn't know how to walk home safely at night.

The Rendille are a camel-herding, semi-nomadic tribe living in the remote deserts of northern Kenya. There was an intense drought, and the British organization Tear Fund set up a camp in the village of Korr to help distribute food aid. Their generator was the only place to charge batteries for 200 kilometers. It was only a ten-minute walk from my hut, but every night the family I stayed with asked when I was coming home and sent a young boy to assist me. A few times I lied and left early—to prove I could make it. But one night I was escorted home by Malmalo, age 12. As we walked through the dark, he carried a battered, long-barreled flashlight; I had a brand new LED headlamp. I remember thinking how nice it would be to give it to him when I left in a few weeks.

My lamp cast a wide, bluish glow, while Malmalo aimed his small, white circle of light right at the ground in front of us. And it was right in the heart of his beam that we found a puff adder snake, one of the deadliest in Africa. It was just a few steps ahead. With only my area light I would never have seen it, and stepped right on it.

I knew puff adders were out there, but in futility long ago gave up looking for them. Besides, others told me I would hear one before I saw it. 'What, exactly, do they sound like?' I nervously enquired. 'Like hissing.'

The night after learning this friends and I were outside for less than a minute when I heard one. Proud of my skills, I announced it to the group. They chuckled. It was just a plastic bag stuck to a thorn bush and blowing in the wind.

My plan was to run. Problem solved, until Malmalo explained otherwise: attracted by warmth, puff adders are known to slither into beds while their occupants are sound asleep. Standard Rendille practice is to eliminate any snake that makes it inside the village limits.

Malmalo's plan was to throw stones at it. Neither his English nor my Rendille were good enough for him to grasp the doubts I muttered next. With Malmalo unmoved by my suggestions, I too picked up some rocks.

Taking turns holding his flashlight's beam on the snake, we hurled stones in its vicinity. After three volleys I summarily dropped a large rock on its skull, victorious. Yet one of Malmalo's earlier swift strikes was the true knockout blow. On our return we burned the carcass to destroy its poison. As I practiced my warrior dance around the fire, I strongly encouraged the use of my new nickname, *Eti Toof Yeeygis*—the Snake Killer. It was much more macho than my regular Rendille name, *Rooble*—when the rains come and things turn green. Or just Green.

For a long time following, daily discussions at the village's wells inevitably turned to the professor who lacked the survival skills of a small Rendille child. And if anyone referred to him as the Great Snake Killer, they were sure to receive howls of thunderous laughter.









Meydimiyy Khalawkhale herds his father's camels back to their village of Uyam to be blessed in the Rendille celebration of Sorio. During the ceremony residents slaughter a goat and dot its blood on every male in the village's forehead, while saying a prayer seeking forgiveness of sins. The remaining blood is daubed across the left side of each camel, accompanied by a second prayer for the animals' health and protection in the coming months. Sorio is primarily enacted by adult men for their camels, leaving women like Maria Gu'duro to remain in their huts for the event.









Rengumo clan warriors paint themselves with ochre before an afternoon of dancing, wearing beads imported from Eastern Europe that take weeks to arrive in Rendilleland. (More traditional necklaces made of roots are less common these days, but still play a role in some ceremonies.) Warriors dance for pure pleasure, and to impress potential spouses. Here Sirayon, a warrior from Saale clan, dances as his age-mates sing for him, striving to jump as high as possible while looking completely at ease.







Bird hunting for a feathered headband in preparation for the end of the four-month circumcision ceremony. In the months leading up to the cutting ritual boys are banned from bathing, roaming from village to village singing in exchange for goat meat. Rendille circumcision happens only once every fourteen years and is considered the highlight of many men's lives. Participants garner great pride in the ceremony, showing their strength by refusing to even flinch when it's their turn.











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