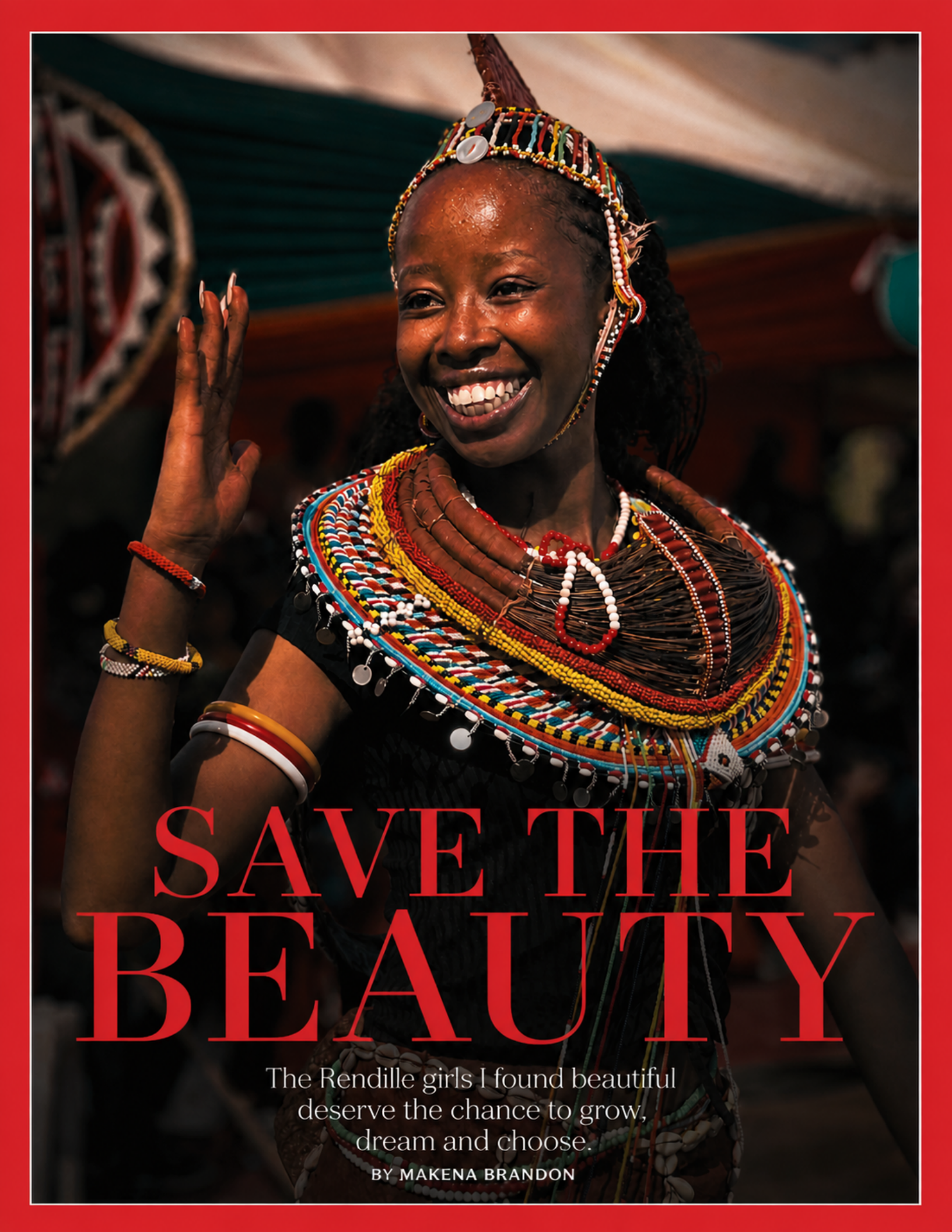


A close-up portrait of a young woman from the Rendille tribe, smiling warmly at the camera. She is adorned with extensive traditional jewelry, including a tall, pointed headdress decorated with colorful beads and a large, multi-layered collar made of intricate beadwork and cowrie shells. She also wears several beaded bracelets on her right wrist. Her right hand is raised in a gesture, with her fingers slightly spread. The background is softly blurred, showing hints of a traditional setting with a patterned cloth.

SAVE THE BEAUTY

The Rendille girls I found beautiful
deserve the chance to grow,
dream and choose.

BY MAKENA BRANDON

A PERSONAL DISPATCH FROM MARSABIT COUNTY

SAVE THE BEAUTY

by Makena Brandon

We arrived in Marsabit County on the 7th, at night, so there wasn't much to take in that first day. But when morning came and the Rendille Food and Cultural Festival began, I started to understand why people had told me this place was different.

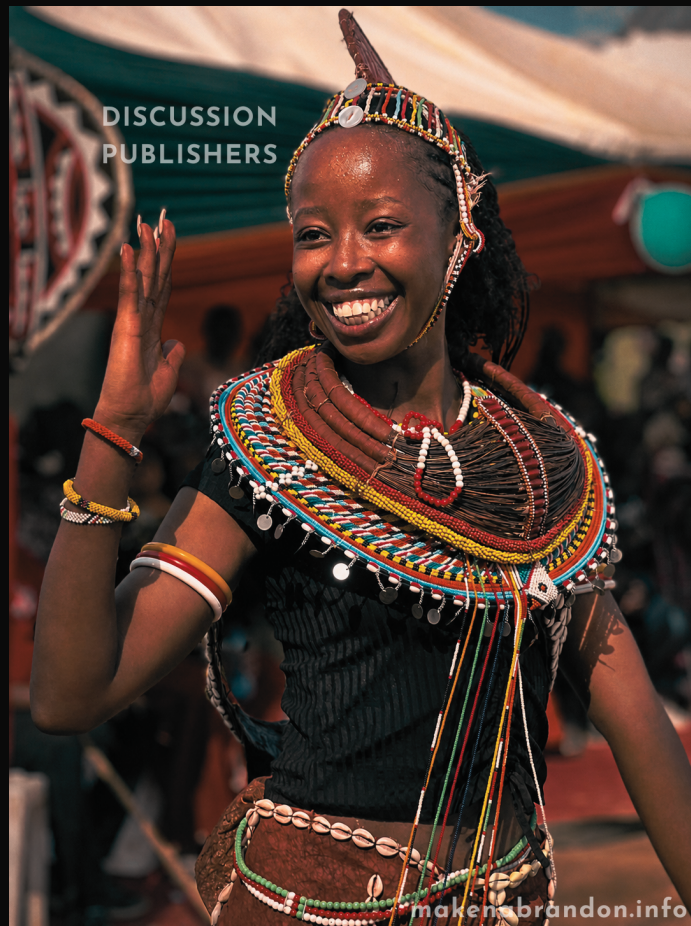
I was there for the second edition of the festival, organized by Margaret Lesuper, and I want to write about that properly another time, because it deserves its own telling. But there is something else that has stayed with me since I left, something I did not expect to find, and I have to write about it now before it settles into something smaller than it is.

That morning, I watched Rendille women move through the festival grounds, and I found myself struck by something I have rarely felt so plainly. They were beautiful. Not one or two of them. All of them, in a way that felt unusual to say out loud. There was no makeup, no performance of beauty the way I've come to expect it. Just women being exactly who they are, dressed in their culture, carrying themselves with a kind of dignity that didn't need an audience to be real.

They were disciplined. Welcoming in the way hospitality is supposed to work, without it feeling like an act. Respectable in the oldest sense of that word. I found myself thinking that I had never really seen beauty presented this honestly before.

On stage, two models were presenting, Natalia Seini and Lucy Naile, and the beauty they carried up there was something else entirely. I got to meet them afterward, we talked, exchanged names, took a photo. Small moments, but the kind that stay with you longer than they should.

Then I met Elizabeth Nairochin Leadoa.



Natalia Seini at the Rendille Food and Cultural Festival. Photo: Makena Brandon.

Elizabeth is Rendille too, and she's currently studying law at the University of Nairobi. Talking to her is where the day shifted for me. She told me, plainly, that early marriage is still happening to Rendille girls. Still. Now. Not something from the stories our grandparents tell, not something that belongs to a version of the community that no longer exists. Now.

I'll admit my first reaction was disbelief. I had assumed, the way people assume things they haven't looked closely at, that practices like this belonged to the past. That they had quietly died out the way certain things do when the world moves on around them. Elizabeth's words told me otherwise, and it landed harder because of everything I had just spent the morning admiring.

Later, I watched children perform a shairi at the festival. I'd taken it, at first, as part of the program, a piece to be enjoyed and appreciated like the songs and the dances around it. It wasn't until the words settled that I understood what I was actually hearing. Children asking, in the middle of a celebration, why they were still being married off. It wasn't a performance. It was a

plea, dressed as one.

That is the part of this trip I can't shake. You go somewhere expecting culture and color and food and welcome, and you get all of that, generously. And then a child stands in front of you and asks why nobody has stopped marrying her off yet, and you realize the celebration and the crisis are happening in the same place, on the same day, to the same girls.

Because that is what this is. When I say beauty, in the title of this piece, I don't only mean the physical beauty I saw that morning, the kind that first stopped me in my tracks. I mean everything underneath it that early marriage takes away before it's fully formed. Childhood. Choice. The chance to finish an education the way Elizabeth is finishing hers. A future a girl gets to decide for herself instead of one decided for her. That is the beauty I'm asking us to save, and it's under threat in the same communities we go to admire.

Utu Heritage was present at the festival for exactly this reason, to honor what is worth honoring in Rendille culture while also standing firmly against the parts of tradition that harm the very girls that culture should be protecting. I don't think those two things are in conflict. You can love a people and still refuse to accept a practice that steals a child's future. In fact, I think that's the only honest way to love a culture, by wanting the best of it to survive and the worst of it to end.

So here is what I keep coming back to. Marsabit gave me some of the most beautiful mornings I have witnessed in a long time. It also gave me a girl's poem asking to stay a child a little longer. I don't think I can hold one of those without the other now.

We need to go back. Not just to admire, but to act. The daughters of Rendille, the beauty of the desert, the face of Marsabit, deserve more than being looked at and praised for a weekend before we all go home. They deserve to grow up. To learn. To dream without a deadline placed on their childhood by someone else's decision.

Go save a daughter in Rendille today.