

# FROM GHETTO TO GLOBAL

Words and Photography by Sinem Bilen-Onabanjo

I have gone where most fear to tread. Yes, I packed my bags, my trusted Canon and took a flight out to Port Harcourt – the capital of Rivers State, Nigeria, infamous for regular kidnappings of mostly white tourists and expatriates by armed militants that claim to fight for a share of Nigeria's oil wealth for the indigenous people of the Niger Delta.



She had already put her creative team together and chosen her models from the 'ghettos' of Port Harcourt (Caterina was initially hesitant to use the word 'ghetto' but was given the green light by the community to do so) and selected locations in Bundu Waterside, Eleme, Marine Base Waterside and Igbikisikalama communities of the city. I was inspired already!

kids, dressed up her models and gave up her hotel room so I could have seamless internet connection), and little kids of Bundu chanting 'iyinbo' (white) every time they spotted me, that will stay with me forever.

What Caterina has planned next aims to take the 'ghetto' global with a travelling exhibition which will see the images from the fashion shoot and documentaries on location shown at the major fashion capitals of the world, from Milan to New York. A "Ghetto" T-shirt will also be commissioned and sold worldwide (proceeds from which will go into community projects). So while you wait to get your hands on a tee, here's a look at the inspirational Afroyinbo and her team of creatives.

It all started with an e-mail in early November from my friend Moyo Aderemi introducing me to the "In Our Ghetto Project" due to launch in Port Harcourt and the talented designer behind the project; a fellow Afroyinbo (white African) and the creator of the fashion label Kinabuti, Nigeria-based Italian Caterina Bortolussi. Not content with just launching a fashion label, with this project, Caterina intended to showcase the dignity, the hope and the beauty in one of the most controversial cities in the world.

However, it took more than inspiration to get to the 'ghetto' – a few emails back and forth, international phone calls, long-winded travel arrangements. Finally, on Monday 6 December – the morning after the FAB Night Out – I was boarding a plane to Port Harcourt, initially for a three-day stay cut down to two days due to FAB commitments, but every minute of which was absolutely inspirational. Two days spent with an inspiring creative team and the FABulous Caterina (who danced with the



## CATERINA BORTOLUSSI — THE DESIGNER

"I am a woman travelling the world and coming to Nigeria, a woman who loves Nigeria and the people of Nigeria, a woman who wants to be inspired in what she does.

I lived in Italy for 20 years and then moved to London. I did what I should be doing, and I studied what I should be studying without following what I wanted or what was my dream. I did investment banking, trading of oil and I wasn't happy at all, so I took a 2-month break to travel.

Before travelling, when I was in London, I went to an exhibition called KUBA about Kurdish people living in Istanbul. I felt inspired. It was very touching. It was a lot of pain as they had been through a lot. What I liked the most is that, despite whatever they had suffered they still had this hope, this belief that life is good. I thought that was really beautiful so I travelled.

I needed to clarify my mind. I wanted to work in advertising - I thought I wanted to work in advertising; I wanted to do something creative. I was tired of London and God brought me this opportunity to travel the world and do advertising all over the world.

First destination was Nigeria. I spent 7 months there but I wasn't happy with what I was doing. I quit my job when the project ended and went back to Italy to work as a stylist - assistant stylist of a very tough stylist in Milan. I couldn't take it. Then I got a call from Nigeria saying "I got a job for you, the commercial director of DHL."

**"Designing clothes was always what I wanted to do, but I saw in it a channel to do something that inspires me and can inspire others and that's how this project got put together."**

I said, "I'll stick to it for two years and then I am going to do what I like - fashion design." After 2 months, they said they wanted me to go to South Africa. I said, "No, me, I stay." I quit my job the same day. It was a matter of 48 hours before I got a new job and moved to Abuja to set up a publishing company. We did a lot of projects; one of them was the film festival (African Film Festival) last year; but this year was the year for me - they year I decided I was going to do my fashion line.

I believe that we are vehicles to God; my friend Nneka she always tells me "It's not me, it's God who channels through

me." Designing clothes was always what I wanted to do, but I saw in it a channel to do something that inspires me and can inspire others and that's how this project got put together.

In September we all met in Italy - my place - my friend Sola, myself, Claudia, Antonella, Bonnie and Fatima, and we discussed how we were going to have the fashion show during the film festival, look for girls in the so-called 'ghetto' in Port Harcourt and give them an opportunity to do the fashion show. Then we pushed it forward - "Let's do a fashion shoot, let's do a documentary," and yesterday the concert took place and it was even more beautiful than when we were thinking about it.

It's been very intense - myself coming to terms with my dreams and also getting to liaise with amazing people where their reality is so different from your own; something you're so close to because you're always reading the paper, but so different from what you expect. Last night we were rocking in Marine base with Duncan Mighty - the passion for life is there despite everything. The aim of this project is to show beauty in all conditions and to make these girls realise that they've got what it takes to become who they want to be in their lives.

We want to put on an exhibition all around the world - like KUBA - to inspire the world. We want to bring the documentary all over the film festivals, with a photo exhibition.

Last night Didier came to me and said, "Do you understand what you're doing? You bring out the beauty, the woman inside these girls." For me it's about giving them an opportunity to work with Rita and Genevieve, to meet Duncan Mighty - someone that says, "I am from the ghetto," to show that there is nothing that can stop us from achieving our dreams. They can be the next Genevieve, they can be the next person in the House of Assembly. It doesn't matter where you are from - we all have a place we come from. But it won't stop you from where you want to go. Mr President comes from the ghetto. The wife, she comes from a ghetto near where we did the scouting. Oprah comes from the ghetto. Akon inspired the name of this project; his album is called *In My Ghetto*.

We created a platform, but it's more what is changing inside of them I am concerned about, because when that changes you change your reality. The only people that can stop us are ourselves. I remember my



LEFT: Massimo Sciacca  
 FAR RIGHT: Biebele  
 Annie  
 BELOW: Clinton  
 Faloughi

For the fashion show, I was more like an art director, taking care of the girls. We all did. The show was great as well. And we are at the final part – today and tomorrow will be really busy. I will start working at 4pm (today), I think, when the sun is going down and the place will be chilling out a bit.

First of all the boot camp was a chance for these girls too – just the fact that they're going to be seen around. It's a good chance for them to get out of the ghetto cause life in the ghetto is f\*\*king hard. I am really happy for that. The project I think is just the beginning. The project could carry on – I am just dreaming of putting up a school in this place here. This is the first collection Caterina made, so it could be the beginning of a long rising career. I wish her all the best. And she loves Africa; she is African already."

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father said, 'Nothing comes easy in life. If you feel that things are easy, there is something wrong. If things are hard, you are in the right path.' It's been difficult at every stage but to get accepted has not been difficult. People accepted us. People here don't want to embarrass themselves, they don't want to be seen as poor or squalor. There is life here; there is dignity.

You are in the most dangerous area, I assure you. I really want this to be a message: we believe what we read; you always think it is much worse than it is, then you come here – people are beautiful, very welcoming. I am not saying things don't happen, but things happen anywhere in the world. We need to remember that it's all about the people, people are good, people have the heart."

## MASSIMO SCIACCA – THE PHOTOGRAPHER

"I am not a fashion photographer; I am a photojournalist and I think that's why Caterina called me for this project.

My first time in Africa ever! I never thought Africa was a place for me to work in, but by some strange chance Caterina gave me I am here. It's already three months I am

around. I am very tired but of course I am enjoying the people; I have many friends now here. The crew is amazing; each one of them is special in a way. I think it's the perfect contradiction to put together these two realities.

The main challenges are the unbelievable heat and you have to organise every little detail here from security to everything you need; you need a person to do it for you. There's Nigerian time.







## ORITON FALOUGHI - MUA

"My sister got involved with the project, and they were looking for a make up artist, so I went in to see Caterina with my book and that was it.

It's been fun, it's been eye opening actually because I have never been to an area like this to see the squalor people live in. It's a little depressing, but they seem happy and cheerful, so there is that side of it. It's definitely been a good experience, but it's been hard work.

Everything is pretty well organised. Of course we have Biebele and he has done all the legwork. There has never been an issue with safety.

It would be nice if other people would get behind the project, so it could become an annual thing or if not an annual thing, then we can take Kinabuto to other areas around the country. I think that would be amazing. It doesn't necessarily have to be about fashion; there could be other people that get inspired by this. Someone can do it to inspire young boys.

My dad grew up in Port Harcourt and I've been here a lot. The last time was 2003. It's a little bit more run down than I remember, but I have got a sister and friends living in Port Harcourt, so I kind of knew what to expect. It's like anywhere in the world. Things happen, but things happen all the time."

## BIEBELE ARIMIE - THE LOGISTICS

"I am a procurement and supply chain management consultant. A friend of mine called me and said Caterina was involved in the African International Film Festival (AFRIFF) - they had a concept of wanting to showcase the good things in the ghetto and they wanted some models. We met and she told me vividly what she wanted. I saw it as a opportunity to also show the world that there are a lot of good things in the ghetto.

We had to first go to the communities to see the chairmen to let them know what we intended to do, so that we don't just walk into the community without them knowing. Then we had to provide 100 girls; we then selected and narrowed them down to 20. This 20 have been involved in the entire project - the photo shoots, the modelling on stage, catwalking. They also taught them how to do their hair and make up.

The main challenge for me because I am handling the logistics aspect of it, is that we wake so early - as early as 4am because we have to set out by 5.30 most times before the day breaks. We work so hard and finish so late.

The other challenge is the challenge of emergencies - change of plans. No time to waste and waking up so early, it's been quite challenging. We also have to move from location to location each day in various communities. I am a supply chain expert, so logistics is a part of my job, something I do very well.

For now we are in Bundu; yesterday we were at Marine Base where Duncan Mighty did a massive show. We'll be back

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there tomorrow morning to continue the shooting. Then there is somewhere called Agri along Agri Road - another waterfront community.

For the ghetto we need security. We don't really need the government security because we don't want any friction - the communities are always feeling threatened that the government wants to demolish their houses and make them homeless. What I do is go to the community, talk to the chairman, ask the chairman to bring me the youth leaders. We need 2-3 men for security, so we can walk around not because something is going to happen but because



sombody who doesn't know you sees you in this community with a camera, they can take the camera. But when they see the faces they know, they know nothing is wrong.

What I hope the project to achieve is for the girls to build more confidence. My final aim is to see how they can be showcased to the world for the world to see and appreciate the fact that there are queens like this here in the ghetto. For girls also to see their lives just don't end in the ghetto, there is hope – begin to look beyond what you were seeing before, you can be a superstar like Oprah. You have to start from somewhere. Kinabuti will put them in front of the world. Once that is achieved then the rest will be history.

There are problems all over the world, there are areas where there are problems but the picture out there is not as bad as which has been painted. The government is not also helping because each time the government wants to demolish the houses, they keep telling you this is where criminals live. Even in the GRAs we've got armed robbers and drug barons who are living like lords. They're not demolishing all those places.

The wife of the current president once lived around this area, Patience. There are a lot of stars. I lived in the ghetto. Today I am the chairman of my professional body in this state and in Bayelsa State. Because I gave myself the opportunity and my parents gave me the opportunity. That is why I have risen to this point. There are still a lot of potentials. There is hope for everybody.

The government needs to change that perception and stop telling the world this is where the criminals live. Those looting our money, where do they stay? In every society we have the good the bad and the ugly, so you don't generalise and say everybody is bad. The community chairman here is the Secretary of the Nigerian Liberal Congress in this state and he lives in the ghetto. We have the bad, I agree - the same way they have the bad in government house. We also have the good - the bold, the beautiful and the intelligent."

## **DIDIER OLIVEIRA – THE STYLIST**

"I got involved with Kinabuti through a friend, Erica and she recommended me as I believe in empowering the women of Africa. Straight away, I said yes. Any chance to work in Africa is a big chance.

The main challenge for me was the heat; I mean, it sounds bad because I am actually



African, but it was my first time in Africa. The heat was a killer, but apart from that, even when I fell ill, even the food that I ate was absolutely gorgeous. I met incredible people, loads of creative people, and Africa is always going to be in my heart forever and I'm definitely coming back.

There are a lot of rich people but there are also people who have almost close to nothing, but they are happy. No matter what, they're always smiling. It actually made me feel a little more humble about everything and it made me want to achieve things even more so that I can actually come back and help those people.

Seeing the transition of the girls from not knowing how to walk or pose, and see them gaining confidence was a big adrenaline rush. They just took everything I said like duck to water. It was so rewarding to see those girls really change. I really want to empower women and I feel blessed to do that even for just two weeks that I was there.

I hope Kinabuti will carry on for years and years and continue to teach, to hopefully even open a school – not just modelling, but even if some African celebrities like Genevieve could give a helping hand to the dream that Caterina has – to do that every year and to bring different talents from Europe and Africa to teach skills. That's what I hope Kinabuti will achieve, to just carry on being stronger, like a snowball that becomes an avalanche."

## **THE MODELS Elizabeth Gambo**

"I was in school in Bayelsa - I study marketing - when some of my friends, some of my community and my chairman called me and said I should come over, there is this show that is coming up. That's how I got myself into Kinabuti. I came here for the show, after the shoot I will go back to school.

It's not easy, it's challenging but at the same time it's exciting too. We learn so many things we didn't know before and meet new people, like when the actresses came, it was so beautiful. It's really a big opportunity for us to mingle with those we have not met before, being hired with them. It's a great thing."

## **Ini Godwin**

"I was just in my house and I heard some people talking about this and I just thought, let me see what's going on, and that's how I got myself involved. It's been very nice. It's my first experience and it's a very big one. I find it very interesting and I have learnt a lot. And you get to meet a lot of people you have not met before, especially popular people. It was a good experience. I'd like to model in the future, but not just here, maybe internationally." **FAB**

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