

PHOTOGRAPHY

# The greenish light of Nsenene • Q&A with Michele Sibiloni

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Michele Sibiloni documented the phenomenon of the harvest of “nsenene”, a food delicacy and an important source of income in Uganda, creating a work that is indeed a glance into the future of our planet.

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Michele Sibiloni's book "Nsenene", published by [Edition Patrick Frey](#), is wrapped in a sort of aura of magic and mystery. An aura made of shimmering green lights spread on the pages, as in a dream where reality and fiction melt into a sci-fi scenario. Moving from a documentary language towards a cinematic aesthetic, Michele Sibiloni's project illustrates the phenomenon of the harvest of "nsenene", a food delicacy and an important source of income in Uganda.

Technically bush crickets but generally referred to as "grasshoppers", nsenene migrate en masse twice a year. During the harvest season, the greenish insects become the targets of a spasmodic hunt made of fancifully contrived tools and traps, and the night turns into an otherworldly experience. Many Ugandans spend their nights waiting for grasshoppers, hoping to catch them and earn money from the harvest.

However, “Nsenene” does not limit itself to documenting a phenomenon that may be considered geographically limited and therefore distant from us and from our daily life. Michele Sibiloni’s work is indeed a glance into the future of our planet.


In fact, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), grasshoppers — and insects in general — are a promising source of food for the future. Adding insects to our diet could reduce world hunger and improve food security. At the same time, deforestation has decimated migratory insect populations and in Africa rains are becoming less and less predictable due to climate change; this means that now cricket-harvesting depends entirely on timing.

The book is an evocative journey where the everyday life of grasshopper hunters is transformed into an oneiric and fragmented vision. Leafing through the book, the feeling is like opening and closing your eyes and always finding yourself in front of a different scene. The greenish light remains impressed on the retina and is fixed in the brain. This “mystical” journey is enriched by essays written by three figures who have a special relationship with the grasshoppers: Bobi Wine, Katende Kamadi and Francis Sengendo. In these texts, present, past and future of nsenene collide, offering an in-depth overview of what the cricket harvest phenomenon is.

Read our Q&A with the author to learn more about the project.



**Nsenene • Michele Sibiloni**

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### **How was your interest in nsenene born?**

I have been fascinated by the traps at night since the first time I saw them in Masaka while I was travelling on a bus at night, the town was entirely lit from the traps, I was mesmerized. This was around 2011.

I did a short video story about how the power cuts were affecting the trappers. This was the first time I got very close and I thought: “As soon as I have time, I want to explore this, all over the country”.

I am interested in documenting the night time in general, and after my previous book “Fuck it” which was shot entirely in an urban area, I wanted to be closer to nature and the countryside.

At the beginning I was attracted by the change of the landscape at night due to the strong lights used in the traps that make the images look greenish.

I am generally interested in stories which are outside the radar of mainstream media but that can indirectly speak about a bigger picture or reflect a bigger image of the country. This project started in 2014 and I have been working till December this year, we are also making a film which we hope to release next year.

### **Aesthetically speaking, what struck you most about what was happening around you?**

The changing landscape between day and night thanks to light in the traps. The swarming is a very emotional moment for everyone, is like a festive season, people are happy and the sky turns green. Seems that nature takes control, and losing yourself in this moment while documenting is really special. And I know this could end one day for several reasons, that is also where the urge of witnessing comes from.

### **You've been documenting the phenomenon for many years: how did you see it change?**

The relationship between man and nature has been an important topic for me. Also, while I was working on the project, the Ebola crisis happened just 70 km from the other

side of the border from where I was working. Later the locust invasion in Northern Kenya and Eastern Uganda, and then the pandemic.

Several of those disasters are connected with the relationship between man and nature and how far man went deep in nature to survive.

During the trapping, not only grasshoppers are caught but also several other insects which are important for the ecosystem. Over trapping is also a problem, but as the country has about 80% of unemployment any possibility to make a living is taken avidly. The number of insects caught decreased over the years, deforestation and climate change played a big role in this, as mentioned in one of the texts in the book by Chairman.

**In the book, most of the images are evocative and not very descriptive. Can you tell me about the way you edited the book?**

I wanted to work around the theme without using a language that was too descriptive, I wanted to make a book that was more about the phenomenon than the people themselves. The work is about the relationship between people and nature, so I decided to use few portraits that I picked in a scrupulous way because they had something unique. I am trying to use my journalistic background to collect information, create connections, make images. But when I edit, I try to step back and make choices that can help me to evolve my photographic language and avoid stereotypes.

**You have worked for many years in Uganda. However, has being a white reporter influenced your work for this project? How did you relate to grasshopper pickers?**

At the beginning a friend from Masaka linked me up with a teacher who was trapping on the side. People involved in the business linked me up with others and I started traveling in different locations, most of the time our friendship developed over the years and we kept in touch with some of them.

I worked for ten years in Uganda, it is something that I am used, I work with Ugandans on a daily basis.

When we were filming for the documentary, the time that we had to spend with the



subjects/characters increased and it helped to build mutual trust. As a team, we have been trying to be a positive element by helping each other (team-trapping crew) with logistics and assistance for people who needed our support.

I think I addressed the gap while working in a more conscious way during the editing part of the project, over the years I made different choices, my approach changed, awareness and self-education regarding certain matters evolved. As also my family is a mix-race family, we face certain issues on a daily basis, no matter in which society we are in. This has been crucial during the editing to make me do what I believed was the right choice.

It has been very important also to join forces with three Ugandan authors to tell their stories regarding this phenomenon, that gives to the viewer their own perspective on this matter.

### **How has your way to photograph the cricket harvest changed over the years?**

I would say it has changed to a certain extent but what has changed more is my way of editing images.

When I work, I am trying to be free, patient, without thinking too much, but when I edit, I look for new scenarios and I am trying to create my own journey. On a long-term project, this affects also the shooting over time, as I start looking for specific things or situations.

### **Are you planning to develop the project further?**

I have been working on a “Nsenene” documentary for the past three years together with Director Daniel McCabe and editor Alyse Ardell. We are editing at the moment and we hope to finish it by the end of the year.

It will be an immersive experience that will be oscillating between the natural world and the human world.

**Uganda is a second home for you and somehow Nsenene was your last project in this land. Does it have a symbolic meaning for you? What do you**

## **hope for the future of this Country?**

Uganda is definitely my second home, I do not think has symbolic meaning, but I hope that will reach as many people as possible. I think is important to document things that are not under the radar and can help to give a bit of a different perspective of a place.

What I hope for the future of Uganda is a tough question... If I have to pick one answer, I would say a peaceful and organic transition of power.

In the past couple of years, many youths related to the opposition have been kidnapped, tortured and sometimes killed, I wish this will stop.

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"Nsenene" by Michele Sibiloni was launched at [Commerce](#) in Milano on 23 June 2021.

For the occasion, the newly opened store presented a large selection of books by Edition Patrick Frey as a publishing pop-up during one month.

Commerce is dedicated to the exploration of contemporaneity through the showcase of the outputs of independent publishing

and thinking, serving as a bookshop, a venue for exhibitions and talks, a concept store; it also proposes itself as publishing house concentrating on editorial design and thought-provoking contents and themes, as well as consultant in communication projects.

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