

21

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Before they pass away

IT'S NOT EVERY DAY that you meet someone with Jimmy Nelson's drive. After all, the British photographer spent close to three years trekking across Amazonian jungles, braving sub-zero temperatures in Siberia, and even surviving a case of meningitis. His mission: to photograph the world's last tribesmen and create an ethnographic record of these fast-disappearing societies – and photograph he did.

Presented in a lavish book aptly titled **Before They Pass Away** and published by teNeues this month, Nelson's haunting images speak to the enduring beauty of these tribes' dress, customs, and time-honoured way of living. With stark portraits of individual natives and scenes of everyday life – including the colourful ensembles of Papua New Guinea's Huli people; Argentinean gauchos' herding techniques; and the extravagant jewellery of the Rabari women in India – this book also discusses the origins, traditions, beliefs, daily lives, and diets of each of the 35 tribes featured. Nelson speaks to Durrah to discuss *Before They Pass Away's* inspiration, key moments from his adventures, his future vision for the project, and much more.



While the conditions were constantly difficult, the true challenge was more in being in an intimate situation with these tribes. When you are passionate about something, you override the physical difficulties.

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01 The Kazakhs, Mongolia

02 Cover of *Before They Pass Away* book

03 A Nenet man, Russia

03 Portrait of Jimmy Nelson

How did you first develop an interest in photography?

As a child I enjoyed taking photos of friends and was always somewhat a creative spirit. I left boarding school in Northern England when I was 18 to take a year off and travel to Tibet, where the main objective was to find myself. I took an old camera with me to just document the experience, but someone saw the images and thought I should publish them. That was in 1986, the year Tibet was opened to tourists. I discovered that I really enjoyed photography, so I continued.

What first motivated you to focus on taking pictures of these tribes?

While I've spent the past 18 years doing advertising photography, my passion has always been ethnic cultures and tribes. It's been a hobby for 25 years but I never did anything significant with it. With the economic crisis of 2008 and the ongoing digital revolution, my role as a photographer changed, which propelled me to make a radical choice. I needed to go to photography's source, so I plunged into this project around 3 years ago with the goal of realizing my dream.

They were all chosen for aesthetic beauty, geographical location, and the diversity of the nature they live in. I originally wanted to photograph 70 tribes, but several were eliminated because they were physically inaccessible or there were bureaucratic barriers in some countries, especially in Africa and the Amazon. Overall, I strived to make the subject accessible to individuals who wouldn't normally be interested in these tribes.

How do you make a connection with these tribes and get them to welcome you into their lives?

When I first arrived, I always made sure they never saw any cameras. I also made myself small – in both a physical and metaphorical sense. I'm quite tall and imposing, but when you make yourself small, you give

them the feeling that they are in control, even if it means spending 4 days crouched in the dirt. I would then try to communicate, usually with the help of translators. In places like Papua New Guinea, where there are thousands of languages, I had to use hand gestures and touching. Another important point is that I always stayed in their accommodation, whether it was a teepee or the ground, because I didn't want to give the impression that I was better than them.

Do you ever show your subjects your work, and if so what is their response?

No, the majority of the sitters for the photography were unaware of the concept of photography.

Their only interest was one of attention and vanity; that I made them feel good, important and beautiful whilst taking the picture.

This project took nearly 3 years to complete and brought you to some of the most remote places in the world, from freezing temperatures in the Arctic Circle to tropical jungles in the South Pacific. How did your survival skills and awareness of nature evolve over time?

I certainly learned a lot. I remember one trip when I was in a swamp and trying to walk across logs in clunky shoes. The natives were laughing at me because I kept falling off the logs – I was unable to feel anything with my shoes! So I took them off and walked barefoot just like them, and didn't fall anymore.

Were there any particularly difficult moments?

At the very beginning of the project, I caught meningitis in Ethiopia. After that, I was very careful and lucky. While the conditions were constantly difficult, the true challenge was more in being in an intimate situation with these tribes. When you are passionate about something, you override the physical difficulties.



What kind of equipment did you use?

Ten percent of what I did was digital and the other 90 percent was achieved with a 50 year old technical plate camera. It's very cumbersome and imposing, and shooting with it takes many hours. When you make images this way, you can enlarge them on an extraordinarily large scale. With digital, they lose their artistic edge and look like plastic. The plate camera has more soul.

What is the significance of capturing these tribes whose traditions and ways of life are dying out?

Although they will always exist, what is happening is that they are abandoning their culture. Affluence is taking over the undeveloped world and in my opinion there should be a balance somewhere in between. I want to show these tribes that they are already rich, that they have something money can't buy. What I want to achieve is bring attention to these people by showing that they are beautiful.

Were there major differences between these people, or – despite disparities in geography, customs, and history – were they mostly similar to one another?

They are all similar in how they live in balance with the environment, and they have achieved the perfect harmony that everyone in the West dreams of.

Do you have any other projects in the works?

Well, everything I'm doing at the moment is tied to this project and will be for the future. Right now I'm working on a film and organizing shoots for 35 more tribes. Hopefully this will be a catalyst for the idea that we are all photographers; everyone travels and maybe they can also spread the same message through photography.



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05 Huli tribe, Papua New Guinea

06 A Maasai warrior, Tanzania

07 The Himba tribe, Namibia



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