



Vanishing

CULTURES

WORDS: SUZY BENNETT // PHOTOS: JIMMY NELSON

Jimmy Nelson has braved speicing volcanoes, swamps and stampeding reindeer to photograph the world's vanishing indigenous cultures. Suzy Bennett talks to him about his adventures.

meet Jimmy Nelson in the arrivals hall of London's City Airport, straight off a plane from Amsterdam. He's only in town for 24 hours and has back-to-back meetings, so the only chance I have to talk to him is during the taxi journey to his West London hotel. While not entirely practical, it seems a fitting place to interview a man who has spent most of his life on the road.

If you haven't heard of Jimmy Nelson, you're likely to have seen his photographs in glossy magazines or art galleries, and you just might have read about the recent controversy that surrounds them. Jimmy is a leading portrait photographer, who has spent three years capturing the world's most remote indigenous cultures, undertaking long, often dangerous, journeys of up to two months to reach them. His aim? To create an ethnographic record of a fast-disappearing world, and to reinvigorate the public's interest in the threats facing traditional groups.

It sounds like a noble cause – so why the controversy? His portraits, published in a weighty coffee-table book entitled *Before They Pass Away*, are unashamedly stylised and exotic. The approach has riled tribal rights groups, not least Survival International, who say the images are a 'photographer's fantasy' – a 'deeply destructive colonial vision' that bears little relation to reality. And the doom-laden title ... well, that's another thing. We'll come back to that.

At 6ft 2ins, wearing jeans, a mountaineering jacket and studded belt, the British-born 47-year-old cuts a striking figure among the dapper businessmen arriving at City Airport on a Thursday morning. Jimmy is entirely bald, having lost his hair overnight from a reaction to antibiotics, aged just 16. He is immediately friendly and down-to-earth, and apologises that I've had to travel to the airport to meet him.

Jimmy started his career as a war photographer, covering conflicts in Afghanistan, Somalia and Central America, and then moved into commercial photography so that he could stay home to bring up his three children with his Dutch wife in Amsterdam. He shoot advertising campaigns for airlines, cigarette brands and banks into his forties, until changes in the industry led to work drying up.

'My wife called it a mid-life crisis; I called it reflection,' Jimmy tells me as we set off. 'I was getting more and more depressed. My wife told me that it was best I go off and do what makes me happy.'

With that, he secured funding from a private backer, packed up a vintage 4x5 plate camera, and spent the next three years photographing the world's most colourful indigenous cultures, often living with them for weeks until they allowed him to photograph them. 'If they said no, I walked away,' he says. Yes, he occasionally paid them, but, more often than not, he donated gifts of animals or food.



Why the old camera, I ask. Wouldn't a digital have been easier? 'I'd never have been able to get the images I got if I'd taken a digital camera,' he says, explaining how the protracted process of taking a photograph on his cumbersome 50-year-old model gives him crucial time to bond with his subjects. 'Digital is too quick, too aggressive, it doesn't force you to communicate.'

The resulting images are extraordinary, not only because of the effort that Jimmy and his subjects have put into making them, but also for the richness of humanity they celebrate. Monks, Masai and Mori; warriors, tribesmen and hunters; Eskimos, herders, pygmies, cowboys, nomads ... they're all photographed in their magnificence, alternately furred and feathered, tattooed and tasselled, painted and pierced, barefoot and bare-chested.



The nomadic Mursi clan lives in the lower area of Africa's Great Rift Valley, Ethiopia. This proved to be one of his most difficult locations, partly because of the aggression Jimmy encountered while photographing gun-toting tribes in the Omo Valley. It was clear he wasn't welcome: he was spat at, shoved, pushed and kicked; and yet he persevered. Choosing subjects was a delicate process: 'You don't want to tell a man carrying an automatic rifle that he's not good-looking enough to be in the picture.'

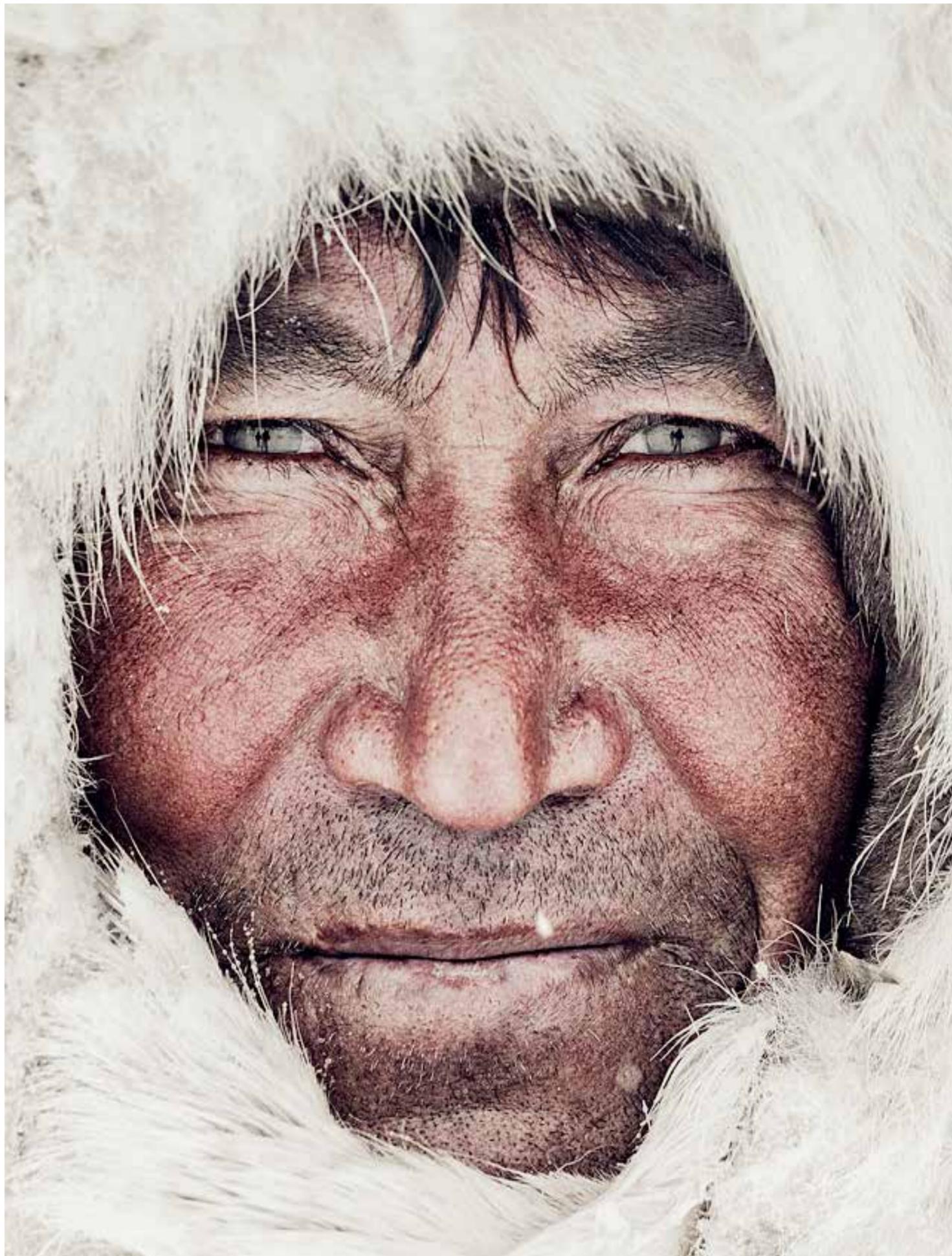


PHOTO: The Nenets people of the Siberian arctic are a nomadic tribe of reindeer herders. Migrating across the Yamal peninsula, where the Ob River and Ural Mountains meet the Arctic coast, the Nenets have thrived for more than a millennium in one of the most inhospitable places on earth, with temperatures that dip to minus 50°C in winter and soar to 35°C in summer.

With so many photographs to choose from, it must be hard to choose his favourites. 'They're the ones that were hardest ones to get,' Jimmy tells me.

Sensing tales of derring-do in the offing, I ask for details, and there follows one of the most edge-of-the-seat conversations I've had for a long time. Jimmy's dedication to reaching even the most inaccessible cultures is astonishing. No terrain was too challenging: deserts, glaciers, rainforests, swamps, salt pans, ice caps, mountain ranges and high seas – he crossed them all, taking whatever transportation was available, including donkeys, camels, rickety old planes, canoes, jeeps, inflatable boats and helicopters.

By far his wackiest mode of transport was a tank, hired to search the frozen wastes of Siberia for the Chukchi, Russia's last remaining nomadic Eskimos. Conditions inside were 'challenging'. Jimmy, his assistant, a guide, a driver and an adopted husky (who rarely stopped barking) shared an eight-metre-square cabin, surviving -50°C temperatures on a diet of tinned spam, dried food and vodka. The only way to find the Eskimos was by following the droppings of their reindeer, and it was a month before they finally caught up with them. 'It felt as if I'd found the last people on the edge of the world,' Jimmy says. In the resulting collection, Jimmy's favourite is a portrait of a mother and daughter. 'They had this look on their faces, so warm and intimate that it melts me every time.'

Tales of other hair-raising voyages abound. To visit the sorcerers and shamans on Ambryn island in Vanuatu in the South Pacific, Jimmy hired a pilot and a 45-year-old Cessna. The flight took them straight between two belching volcanoes, and saw them touching down on the island's only viable landing place: a beach. So real was the possibility of crashing into the sea that Jimmy kept an inflatable boat on his lap, just in case.

In Ecuador, he canoed through the piranha and crocodile-crowded waters of the Amazon to reach the Huaorani tribe. In Kenya, he trekked for two-weeks through lion country to photograph the Samburu – 'a true African bush experience'. In Nepal, he suffered

altitude sickness trekking up 5,000m-high passes to reach Mustang's Kingdom of Lo. In Namibia, photographing the Himba, his plane was caught in a sandstorm, prompting an emergency landing on a road. In Papua New Guinea, he trekked barefoot for two weeks through leech-infested swamps to reach the Korowai tribe. The eventual meeting, he says, was a true 'first encounter': two thirds of the tribe had never seen a white person before.

Of course, the adventures didn't stop just because he'd arrived at his destination. Jimmy's funniest encounter happened while sleeping in a yurt en masse with Mongolia's Tsaatan tribe, the country's last surviving reindeer herders. They'd been drinking vodka, he couldn't get out in time, and he wet himself. It doesn't sound altogether funny, until he reveals they were promptly trampled by stampeding reindeer, animals which, unbeknown to him, are attracted to the salt in urine. More than 40 reindeer proceeded to lick Jimmy from head to toe, much to the amusement of the Tsaatan.

The most touching moment happened while photographing Kazakh warriors in Mongolia, who survive by hunting foxes and rabbits with eagles. Having spent days begging them to take their photograph, and then waiting for the right light conditions, everything was finally in place for Jimmy's dream image. He took off his gloves to put the metal photographic plate into the camera, whereupon his fingers froze to it in the sub-zero temperatures. He had no choice but to rip his fingers off the plate, and collapsed on the ground in agony. A 'very large' Mongolian woman swiftly scooped him up, opened her fur coat and planted his frozen, bleeding hands across her breasts. Another woman wrapped herself around him from behind, and they both rocked him gently, humming, until he regained composure, and enough feeling in his fingers, to take the photograph. It's one of Jimmy's most iconic images. The experience taught him a valuable lesson. 'By showing humility and fragility, you connect with people in a way you otherwise wouldn't.'

PHOTO: The Kazakhs are the descendants of Turkic, Mongolic and Indo-Iranian indigenous groups and Huns that populated the territory between Siberia and the Black Sea. They are a semi-nomadic people and have roamed the mountains and valleys of western Mongolia with their herds since the 19th century.





The ancient Arctic Chukchi live on the peninsula of the Chukotka. Unlike other native groups of Siberia, they have never been conquered by Russian troops. Their environment and traditional culture endured destruction under Soviet rule, by weapon testing and pollution.

Due to the harsh climate and difficulty of life in the tundra, hospitality and generosity are highly prized among the Chukchi. They believe that all natural phenomena are considered to have their own spirits. Traditional lifestyle still survives but is increasingly supplemented.





Having suffered so many brushes with serious injury, I wonder if Jimmy ever questioned himself. Yes, he admits, regularly. On the island of Tanna in Vanuatu, he photographed the Yakel people on the crater rim of Mount Yasur, an active volcano, as it spewed lava and rocks. The footage is on YouTube. 'I realised I was putting everyone at risk, not just myself. Hadn't I taken the limits too far?' No one was harmed, and Jimmy says it wasn't as risky as it sounded, but there's no escaping the irony of photographing one of the world's most threatened cultures in such a dangerous location.

It's not just about discovering the world, it's about discovering yourself. Do less. Get to know one person, one village, or one environment. The rewards are far more profound. It's about quality, not quantity.

This aside, my impression is that Jimmy cares deeply about the future of the people he has photographed, and he speaks about them with an almost evangelical passion. Indeed, he has now started revisiting them to give them copies of his book in the hope that it will show them that their traditional customs are still valued. 'I want to illustrate to them through the pictures that what they already have is phenomenal. I want to show them that they might be better off where they are, rather than throwing it all away, putting on a grey t-shirt and moving to the city. The world is changing and we can't stop it but, in my own way, I hope to encourage them not to abandon everything that makes them so individual.'

Despite his good intentions, the criticism levelled against him is bruising. Under one story on The Guardian's website, about his dispute with Survival International, readers call him 'exploitative',

'narcissistic' and 'hollow', describing his work as a 'lie', 'disgusting' and 'false', and dubbing it 'stylised exotica for Western eyes'.

Jimmy's defence is quick and well-rehearsed; hell, he's had to muster it enough times. He finds the conventional portrayal of ingenious groups 'sitting in dirt with flies all over them' patronising, adding 'it's emotional blackmail – a way for charities to extract sympathy and money from the public. We should be celebrating the beauty of these people, not patronising them. My photos of them are dignified and respectful. I put them on a pedestal.'

So what about the title of the book, then: *Before They Pass Away*? A little sensationalist, perhaps? It wasn't his choice, says Jimmy, but that of his backer's marketers. 'There is an element of truth in the title. It's not necessarily they themselves that will die, but something culturally.' He tells me the groups he fears for most are those in Southern Ethiopia because new roads mean 'they're becoming so accessible'.

Our taxi is approaching Jimmy's hotel so, during our final few minutes, I ask him for advice on taking good travel portraits. 'Instead of filling up a memory card, just take one iconic picture,' he advises. 'Really look at the people. If you are there to steal something from them, if you don't really care, that will be projected in the photograph. You have to give yourself to them because you're taking something from them.'

And any advice on how to get the most out of travelling? 'It's not just about discovering the world, it's about discovering yourself. Do less. Get to know one person, one village, or one environment. The rewards are far more profound. It's about quality, not quantity.'

Before we part, he tells me about his biggest lesson of all. 'It's not always about what you achieve: failing can be a great advantage. It's healthy to fail, to hurt, to get burned. Only then do you know your borders and what you can and can't do.' He should know: he's a man who has crossed more borders than most.

LEFT: Vanuatu. Settlement in the 85 Vanuatu islands dates back to around 500 BC. There is evidence that Melanesian navigators from Papua New Guinea were the first to colonise Vanuatu. Over centuries, other migrations followed. Nowadays, all the inhabited islands have their own languages, customs and traditions. Their isolation from the rest of the world and the pristine, resource-abundant surrounding natural environment have led to the emergence of a unique culture and lifestyle.

Jimmy Nelson // www.beforethey.com // @Jimmy_P_Nelson

