

Three years ago British photographer Jimmy Nelson embarked on a perilous journey into relatively uncharted territory.

Seeking the world's most aesthetically beautiful but culturally endangered tribes, he travelled to the planet's extremes: from the harsh and unpredictable winter terrain of North East Siberia to the searing heat of the African desert.

His aim? To illustrate the wealth of culture that the developing world still holds within its possession, and its immeasurable value.

"Up until the age of seven I lived in the developing world," Nelson told World Traveller. "[So] from a very early age I was made aware of the rapid cultural changes

## TRIBAL QUEST

happening around the world. [As] a visual messenger I am trying to readdress the balance of understanding as to what is real affluence. I am teaching the developed world what they have lost and enlightening the underdeveloped world [as to] what they still have."

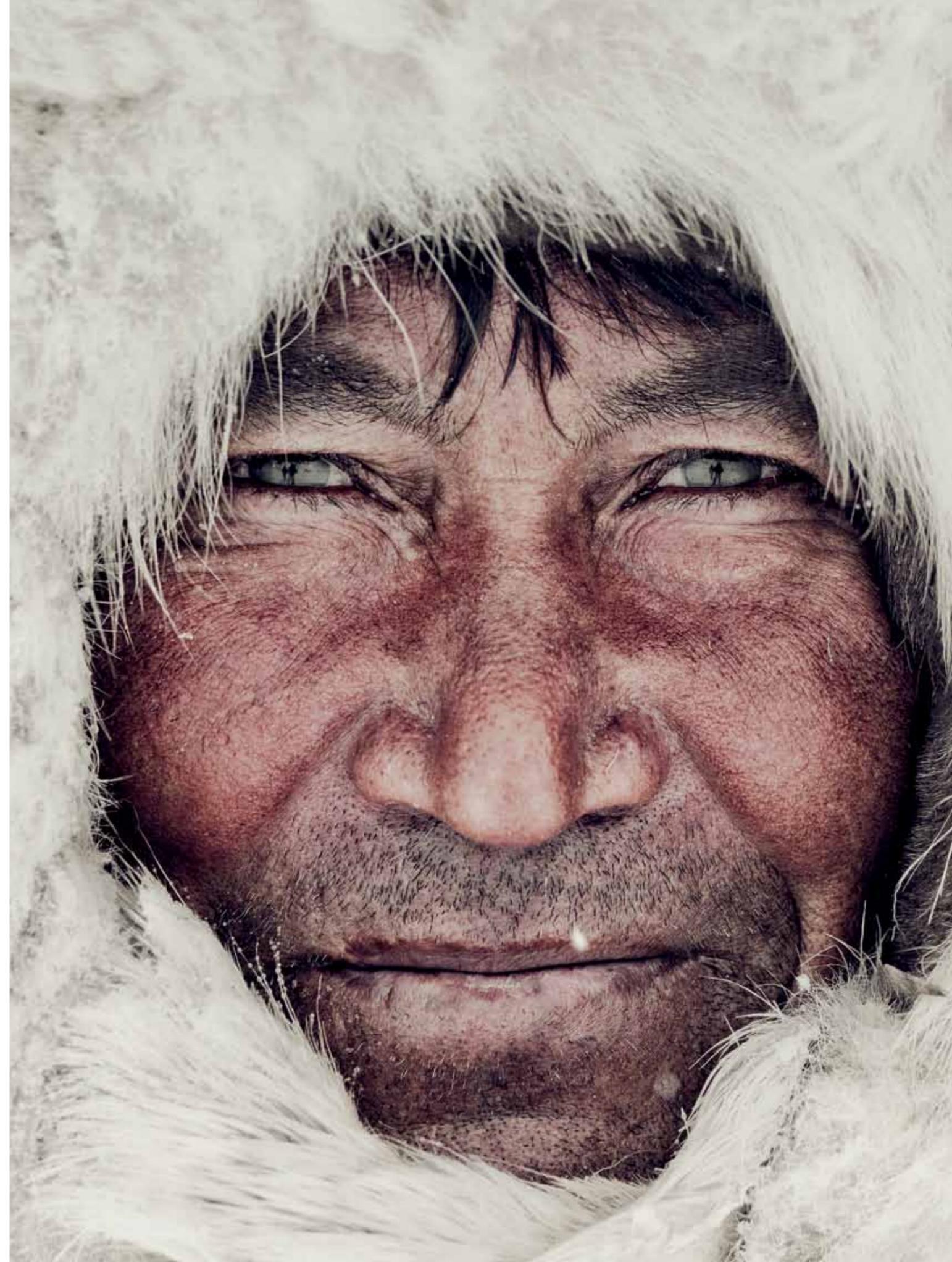
At the tender age of 18, an inquisitive Nelson began researching the world's tribes, tracking down local contacts on the ground to learn more about accessibility to the tribes. "Most of these locals eventually accompanied me as guides and translators," he explained.

In preparation for the gruelling 13 journeys that stretched 44 countries, Nelson embarked on a fitness routine that involved "a lot of running and a very controlled diet". It would come in handy when faced with the inevitable danger and unpredictability that accompanied the trip.

"The more isolated, the more difficult to reach, the more pain and hard work it takes, the better," he said. "One has to pay in a physical and mental way to have the honour to mingle with a tribe.

"The most difficult was the journey to Chukotka and the Chukchi people. This group of nomadic reindeer herders live in the far most remote corner of North East Siberia. There are only two families still left living in this manner, roaming around the Arctic tundra.

"The difficulty of the journey was the extreme cold (minus 40 degrees Celsius) and the fact that no one really knew where they were. We planned a five-week trip but



Photography supplied by: Photo © Jimmy Nelson Pictures BV, beforethey.com

Photography supplied by: Photo © Jimmy Nelson Pictures BV, beforethey.com



in the end only managed to spend three days with them making pictures because it took us three weeks to find them.”

The journey not only took its toll on Nelson’s body, but also on his camera equipment and his ability to physically take shots. “To counter this, I took a very old technical / mechanical camera with me – a machine that would always work no matter what the conditions,” he said. “The reason for the film camera was three-fold. One, due to the camera’s bulk it was an imposition on time, so great stillness was needed by the subject. This process forced me and the subject to really connect through mutual concentration. Two, the quality of large format film when greatly enlarged is far superior on a painterly level to that of a digital pixelated photo. And three, the scale gives the subject a dignity, which I wanted to communicate.”

The bond between Nelson and his subjects is clear in the powerful images that resulted from the expedition, but it was not easily formed.

“We were often met with a great deal of skepticism about our intentions and understandably so. Wherever we

went, we would always approach the people we shot with enormous dignity. I deliberately physically position myself lower than them, to shoot in an upward angle. When the tribesmen saw me struggling, yet supplying an unending flow of compliments, they figured they had to do their best too.”

The best example of this is the image of the Kazakh eagle hunters on their horses.

“  
There is a pure beauty in  
their goals and family ties,  
their belief in nature  
”

“We had to wait two days for the right conditions. When on the third try we finally got the right light, I took my gloves off and started taking pictures. But it was so excruciatingly cold my hands froze within seconds. I couldn’t feel them anymore and started crying – out of pain, but mostly out of frustration. Behind me

were two of the women who, unknown to me, had walked up the mountain with us. In an incredible special, almost supernatural gesture, one of the women opened her jacket, the other grabbed my hands and put them on the woman’s chest and closed her coat around us. They enveloped and held me tight for five minutes, humming softly in the howling winds. All the while the men stayed on their horses and didn’t move a muscle. When I could feel my fingers again, they raised their chins, I took two pictures and nobody ever said a word about it. These were people that maybe didn’t quite understand what I wanted, but fully felt what I needed.”

It was moments like these that will remain with Nelson forever. “Tribes and forgotten cultures teach us about aspects of humanity such as love, respect, peace, survival and sharing. There is a pure beauty in their goals and family ties, their belief in nature, and their will to do the right thing in order to be taken care of when their time comes. Whether in Papua New Guinea or Kazakhstan, Ethiopia or in Siberia, tribes are the last resorts of natural simplicity.”



Photography supplied by: Photo © Jimmy Nelson Pictures BV, beforethey.com

While Nelson's journey has now ended, the project has just begun. Having compiled his images into a book – Before They Pass Away by Jimmy Nelson, by teNeues – he intends to return to show the tribes their images.

"I want to show them how important we regard them," he said. "Then there are another 35 different tribes I want to visit to make it a whole set: tribes or tribal authorities which when I originally approached them were hesitant to let me take photographs due to my unknown status. Once the project achieves an

element of authority I may be able to re-approach them for access."

The experience has left an indelible impact on life and his approach to it. "All the tribal members had a deep and passionate knowledge for the nature within which they lived.

"I hope that everyone who views the work will be moved in one way or another: they don't necessarily need to visit the tribes in these wild location but they do need to take stock of how fragile their own culture is and the human planet in general." ○



Book: Collector's Edition XXL Before They Pass Away by Jimmy Nelson, published by teNeues, available now for €6,000 from [teneues.com](http://teneues.com) Small edition for €128 released next month 2013