

STYLES Q+A

Images From the Edges of the Earth

By GUY TREBAY

For sheer splendor, the catwalks of New York, Milan and Paris combined cannot touch the eagle hunters of Mongolia. Riding squat ponies through the mountains, these Turkic peoples wear high-domed fur hats, embroidered felt leggings, cloaks of reindeer hide, fearsome hooded eagles perched on their arms.

If the fierce elegance of their clothing matches that of the stark landscape they inhabit, it also testifies to the irrepressible human will to beautify.

Their images feature in "Before They Pass Away," the British photographer Jimmy Nelson's tombstone-size new volume (teNeues, \$150) documenting 35 of the world's most imperiled tribal cultures.

In recent telephone interviews, the 45-year-old Mr. Nelson spoke from his home in the Netherlands about a project he considers the work of his life. The following is an edited version of those conversations.

Q. How did this project begin?

A. My father was a geologist who worked for an international oil company, so I spent the early part of my childhood in Africa, Asia and South America. At 7, I was uprooted from Nigeria and sent to a traditional Jesuit boarding school in northern England. I was marginalized from the beginning, and ostracized, but the defining experience of my life came when I was 16 and had a nervous reaction to antibiotics prescribed for malaria. I developed alopecia totalis and lost all my hair.

I'm not sure I see the connection.

To go overnight from being a middle-class, private-school boy to, essentially, a skinhead was a profound experience. Looking back on what I'm doing now, it seems clear my fascination with appearance, what one looks like, with individual expression, originates in wanting to be understood for something beyond appearances.

How did that lead you to photograph the least



own people in the world?

I'd originally meant to study architecture but became a bit lost, and didn't go to university. Being lost was a good thing. I proactively decided to try finding my identity among other people who were bald — that is, among shaven-headed Tibetan monks. I disappeared to Tibet in 1986, the year after it had officially opened to foreign tourists. I walked from one end of the country to the other, taking a small camera with me. I was 19 when I got back, and I showed all these happy snaps to people and realized that I had sort of been set on my path. It was a very childish way of solving a problem. But for me it worked.

That then led you to your first career, as a commercial photographer?

Until the age of 24, I tried to do journalism. I went to a number of wars. Then I met my wife, and she said, "If we're going to start a family, we are not going to get very far this way." So I learned a trade and got into advertising photography, which is where I spent the past 18 years selling alcohol, cigarettes, airlines and banks.

Hard to imagine after seeing you standing in a stream in New Guinea.

All along, I would do what I'd done in my childhood: disappear and go on a little bit of an expedition. Then four years ago, with the financial crisis and the changes in commercial photography, I realized I'd become a chef who wanted to produce a five-course meal for clients who wanted hamburger.

My wife and agent pushed me to indulge my lifelong passion for, essentially, ethnicity and to find an investor to fund a project inspired by Edward Sheriff Curtis and his great photographs of Native Americans.

And you found Marcel Boekhoorn.

He is a new-money philanthropist who is in a position to reinvest his wealth.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIMMY NELSON/TENEUES

How much did he invest?

The initial amount was 400,000 euros. It's probably a lot more now.

The Curtis analogy is interesting, because his work remains controversial having romanticized and, in some cases, falsified images of American Indians.

I'm not an anthropologist, but it's inescapable to notice that in the 45 years I've lived, so much of traditional culture is vanishing so quickly that there's this imperative to document it. Go to the very furthest place I've been, and within a two-day walk, you can be on the Internet.

But the pictures are as elegantly framed as anything in Vogue.

Yes, I directed the majority of the pictures, which Curtis also did. The images are manipulated for light and composition. And 80 percent of the people I photographed are dressed as they do daily. About 20 percent are in their Sunday best. And although Curtis has been mocked for his work, there is no question that he created an important document and one that inspired a lot of pride.

Clockwise from top left, Ansari, a Dropka woman from Dha Village, Kashmir; Kazakh eagle hunters of Mongolia; Patric, a Kalam tribesman from the Central Highlands of New Guinea; Dele and Lale, Kara boys from the Omo River valley in southern Ethiopia; Noel Pearse, left, and Dominique Pere at Huka Falls in New Zealand's North Island; and Thashi Lhamu, a Choser villager from Upper Mustang in Nepal.

Pride?

Put it this way: Amid the extreme affluence of the developed world, we're tending to lose the plot. We're trying to find balance. These tribal peoples, in many cases, have the balance already, though they're not necessarily aware of it. Part of the project is that I will gather images of the 35 tribes I've done so far and take them back to the people I've visited to create a dialogue, to illustrate the importance of what they have.

You don't imagine they already know?

Perhaps. But a lot of these people are in danger. If you are looking for truly vulnerable tribes, you go into Congo. You look for the pygmies. Five years ago, in some places I visited, it would have taken three weeks to reach these people. Now there's a concrete road and you can reach them in two days. Lands are threatened and traditional ways of life are under siege.

Which group was hardest to reach?

Northeastern Russia was a journey of seven weeks. The Kazakhs in northwestern Mongolia took two weeks to reach. We also spent days communicating what I wanted,

setting off at 2 in the morning to get the sunrise. The first two mornings, there was no sunrise and so we trekked back down the mountain. On the third morning, at 5:30, the sun started to rise and I was finally seeing the picture I'd dreamed of making.

And then?

My camera is primarily metal. When I took my gloves off to take a picture, my hand froze to it and ripped off the skin of my hand. I was frozen, bleeding and angry with myself for bothering to use such a cumbersome object.

But you still got the picture.

Several women from the village had followed behind us. One beckoned me and opened her jacket. She grabbed my hands, put them on her armpits and held them there. It was a very moving moment. Here was this stupid, bald English guy running around crying like a child, and this woman overrode some strong cultural prejudices to help me. Time and again on this project, I found that the more things went wrong, the more empathy I received.